

A LUSTY NOVEL THAT PEEKS INTO EVERY BOUDOIR OF SHOW-BUSINESS!

PDC

BEDTIME BLONDE

A vintage-style illustration of a blonde woman with voluminous hair, wearing a white off-the-shoulder dress and green high-heeled sandals. She is lying down, looking towards the viewer with a slight smile. A man with dark hair, wearing a purple shirt, is leaning over her, his face partially obscured. The background is dark and moody.

By *John Wilstach*

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Queen of Passion!

There's nothing like the fury of a woman scorned. At least, that's what the dashing Jim Redwood found out after taking the **BEDTIME BLONDE** over the hurdles! But seductive Bonnie Laurie knew too much about men to take such a humiliation lying down. Possessing the advantages of a beautiful body, a cunning intelligence, and a way with the opposite sex, the voluptuous beauty put body and brains to work and became famous for both! And it wasn't too long before Jim and his buxom bedmate, Brenda, were given the works. But without woman-hater Slim Travers' help Bonnie could never have done such a complete job!

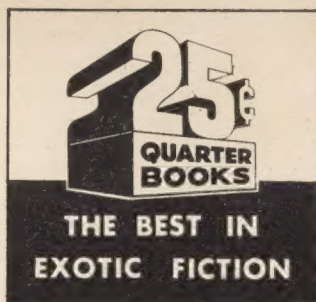
(Specially posed by professional model)



BEDTIME BLONDE

by

JOHN WILSTACH



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CHAPTER ONE

BRENDA stretched carefully in the big double bed, for she knew how angry Jim could be when he was suddenly awakened. Her left hand reached over softly to touch his shoulder, that part of his virile body which she loved the most. Then she blinked in sudden fear and raised herself to her elbows. The pillow beside her bore his imprint, but he was gone.

She leaped out of the bed, nearly tripping on the long black silk night robe, pushed her toes into silly little mules and dashed into the front room of the bungalow she had rented the day before under the name of Mrs. Brenda Matthews. There on the couch lay Jim Redwood, breathing easily, one arm across his eyes.

His wonderful mouth, for which she often thirsted in vain, was now curved in a little smile, as if in his dream he was planning new deviltry. He was lying in only a T shirt and Brenda looked greedily at the fine athletic form that dissipation, so far had not affected.

"When I woke up in the morning he was gone," she hummed, happily, as she took the nearly empty bottle of Scotch from the table, and carried it, along with several highball glasses, into the kitchen. She returned for soda bottles. Then she ran her bath, not bothering to close the door. Jim was not easily awakened by sounds, but at the touch of a hand he would awaken all over. Yet, she thought, he had never served a day in the jug, nor had she, either, for that matter, though she had experienced several close shaves, and Jim would have left her to face the music alone if she ever had a run-in with the law.

"The adorable beast!" she murmured, and pulled the night robe over her head. Low on her neck, at the end of a thin gold chain, was a little bag—her boodle bag—with some rings in it, and cash. She now took this off and put it on the window sill. This was nut money as gamblers called it. She couldn't trust a pocketbook with Jim about.

She poured perfumed bath salts into the hot water, then stepped in. She was still lovely at thirty, particularly in the night light, which was kind to her midnight blue hair and her somewhat oriental brunette beauty. Though she was really Celtic, with blue eyes, her too rounded lips, crimson without lipstick, made her look as if she came out of an Eastern harem.

Bedtime Blonde

Using lots of scented soap, she washed her voluptuous body, until she appeared like a flashing figure in a bubble dance. With bosom rising and falling in the water, as she swirled about, Brenda thought of that last lucky touch in New York. Two grand from rolling that rich John as he lay sleeping heavily in her hotel suite from the dose of chloral hydrate she had mixed in his second highball. And just as he had his coat off and was reaching for her! She recalled the expression that had crossed his face. Afterwards, she had phoned Jim and he had lifted the leather. By midnight, they were on a train going north. The grapevine had it that dicks on the Broadway beat had been alerted to a lush rolling moll who met men at swagger night spots. It had been time to move on . . . Her description was out. Never tarry too long, that was Jim's motto. So he had bought tickets to Bordain.

Brenda dried herself on a big Turkish towel, put the gold chain over her head, settled the boodle bag between her firm breasts, and slipped on the thin black nightrobe again. In the bedroom she went to the dressing table, dashed aphrodisia over her hair, dabbled drops of it in the palm of her right hand and closed the fingers. Then she returned to the front room and opened the hand under Jim's nose so that he must smell the heady perfume.

As Jim coughed and opened his eyes, she tried to slip in beside him on the couch. But instead of making room, he rolled over, caught her to him suddenly in a long, slow kiss that drained her soul out of her. Then he gave her a hearty slap on the behind and pushed her away as he threw his legs over the side of the couch.

"Not this morning, Brenda. Never talk of love when there is work to be done. Put on some water for coffee, like a good gal. And I'll have some cold orange juice. Eggs three minutes, you know, and toast that is crisp."

His voice changed from a soft tone to one of command.

"And throw a house coat on. This is no time to be tempted by your charms, my pet."

He laughed, and she went quickly to make breakfast. To a camp follower it was always a good morning when the chief awakened in good humor. But what was this talk of work to be done? She had looked forward to some rest and a holiday, instead of the endless sex work that was chaste only because Jim saw quicker and better pickings with larceny than sin. Straight sin, he always said, was something a man gasped for, in advance, and then tried to make a

bargain for, afterward, when time came to pay. Take everything on him and you couldn't go wrong. Again, you couldn't work a small city like Bordain, with only four hotels. . . .

Jim came into the kitchen, combing his hair with his fingers. He sat down at the little table, and inspected his hands, admiringly, while a smile played over his handsome face. All the right things had been given to the wrong man, thought Brenda, even though she was his slave. Thirty-four, tall, well set, he looked still like a young faun on a Grecian vase. His features might have been actually perfect were it not for the firm set of his jaw. The brown eyes were tender, when he wanted them to be, and steady. They looked directly at a speaker, unflinching, though he could lie with a low, sincere voice.

Brenda set his breakfast in front of him. She took only coffee, herself, since she was on a diet.

"Jim, I know you hate questions, but what's the new pitch? What's for us in a town like this? What kind of operation?"

"None, Mrs. Matthews, for you. I merely want you to join a church and the ladies' aid, and imagine, if you can, that you are a virgin, again—if you can remember back that far."

Her blue eyes snapped and she swung at him. But he dodged with a grin.

"Just fooling, honey. This is a one man campaign, for the jackpot. Then you will come in."

"I know that," she said, quietly. "Unless you kill me. And there will be certain papers opened by a certain party if I come to a sudden death. I could put you away for life."

"And do a nice spell in the women's jug yourself, darling."

"Not only those lush rollings, darling, but those fake marriages which you announced to the astonished brides, and threatened scandals until they came across with what they had. I even know where to lay my hands on that drunk who can pose as a minister. But we understand one another."

Jim Redwood held his cup for a second pouring of coffee.

"I've had my eyes peeled for a medium-sized city, and a gal over twenty-one with coin in her own name. I've felt it was time for one big killing. Frame some young broad, marry you, and settle down."

Brenda laughed. In an endeavor to beat the draft, Jim had put her down at the board as his wife and had even listed two imaginary children. They had taken him, anyway, and she had drawn a nice allotment for two years.

"You mean you'll level with me this time?"

"That is what I mean. Well, my sweet moll, I've been reading scores of out of town papers. One from this burg, several days back, listed an accident in which Paul Merston and his wife were killed. His automobile overturned. He lived long enough to scribble, with witnesses, on a strip of paper that he was leaving everything to his daughter, Bonnie Merston. The sheet said she celebrated her twenty-first birthday last month. The funeral is tomorrow. I'll be there, in my uniform."

"Ah, I wondered why you packed it."

"Mr. Merston's son died in the war, a flier in the Pacific. Frank, by name. He and I were great pals. I'll be at the funeral, because of him, to pay my respects. And, of course, I shall meet Bonnie."

"So, it is Bonnie already?"

"Now listen, Brenda, and get this straight. As far as the bed goes, you have all the assortments I need. This is tough business, I'm renting an office in the Muntake Building, and I'll have gold letters on the door: INVESTMENT CONSULTANT. I do know the stock and bond game. I may have to marry this dame. But it will only be a couple months before I frame her for the gate. Then we can settle down with her dough. Being married a spell, and working romance for the coin, will be work and just that. I'm not a sucker, kid, except for you—a luxury that pays its way. Women have always been strictly a game to me."

She sighed. "But what if this babe is already engaged?"

"Don't you trust daddy? A professional should be able to handle an amateur every time. Gals, good or bad, all have the same line. They make the guys come to them, nature helping out with the bait. I don't intend to touch this dame. Mine shall be humble, timid devotion, until her vanity can't stand the suspense of whether I want her in my arms or not. And then she will tumble in to find out."

"How is the bank roll?"

"You have three grand to go along on. I put seven grand in the bank yesterday, and the president is putting me up at his club. I'll move there this afternoon. I shall not see you downtown. Maybe for a few weeks my visits here will be infrequent. It all depends."

"And what do I do to entertain myself?" Brenda asked, tartly.

"Order some dark, conservative clothes, as if emerging from mourning. Try to act respectable and like it. Cut down on the drinks and safeguard the figure that first prompted me to put you to work. There

is a possible killing in this and I'm not going to take any chances of being seen around town with any woman—except Bonnie.”

He said Bonnie in a caressing tone of voice, as if rehearsing.

“Say, big fellow, you must have some clippings cut out. Let me take a gander at them.”

“They’re in the inside pocket of my coat.”

Brenda ran out and got the folded columns from the Bordain News Dispatch, pushed the coffee cup away, and spread them out on the table. There was a two column spread on the accident, also a reproduction of an old photo of the son who had died in the war. The account had been carried over to another page, and here it was that Brenda found what she was looking for: a full length photograph of Miss Bonnie Merston, hair tied with ribbons, evidently taken a few years ago.

The eyes were big and wide, the lips were in a happy smile, and there was a dimple in the right cheek. The face was a perfect oval, and the curly hair appeared light, in the reproduction, and might be blonde.

“I bet in real life that is a swell looking babe,” she murmured, slowly.

“That will make the work easier. But don’t worry, kid, my heart belongs to Brenda.”

“Your heart may or may not exist, but you belong to me all right. And you’ll continue to belong to me, Jim. If you ever tried to double time me, I’d come after you with a gun, and I’d shoot you down like a dog.”

“I think you would,” he said, musingly.

Her face was flushed, becomingly, and she appeared exotic, handsome in her anger. He liked her that way.

“I’m leveling with you, but don’t think the honeymoon can be platonic. I have to sell myself as a stallion to put the financial deal across.”

“I understand,” she said, sullenly. “But if you are going to act so well you might give little Brenda something to remember you by. This morning I get all scented up expecting you to be the heavy lover. And what do I hear? A version of ‘Not today, Josephine.’ Don’t you think—”

Jim smiled, boyishly, and he reached across and grasped her hands, turning first the left over, and kissing the palm, and then the right. Then he took her by the wrists, kicked the chair aside, and with a

little burst of strength snatched her out of her seat and into his arms. His left hand went under and she was lifted into the air, half laughing, half hysterical, half flooded with a joy that was almost overpowering. Then he carried her into her big room at the right of the bath.

He toppled over with her on the bed, and he brushed his lips against her cheek, like a butterfly, until his mouth fastened on her own.

"I sure must give you something to remember me by," he said, softly, "for it may be quite a time till we hit the jackpot."

Brenda did not reply. She was squealing in a delirium of surrender. That was the effect he had on her, when he was holding her in his arms, and his lips were seeking mastery. Bonnie—was that the blonde's name?—she would know a little mocking, fake rapture. But Jim was hers, he would always be hers. It was wonderful not to talk any longer, to exchange words for the transport of kisses. Jim Redwood might not be worth while for anything else, but what a lover, what a lover!

Brenda shivered in the thrill of sensual anticipation.

"You are a no account hound," she whispered, "but, oh, Jim, you can be so sweet when you think it is to your advantage."

He gave her that impish, boyish smile.

"Sweetie, always remember this—I'm different. I don't play a babe's game, I make her play mine."

But then he was intent on mastery, and she was his prey, and she was only the tool through which his passion was expressed. She adored his roughness, his strength, and she gloried in being treated as if she were a woman taken in a town plundered by conquerors, and merely part of the loot. She ceased to be Brenda, she became a woman without thought, living only sensation. She loved this drowning of her senses in emotion, in the kind of pleasure that Jim knew how to prolong.

Then she lay, panting, and alone.

"What a lover!" She sighed. "If he ever gets away from me, my name isn't Brenda."

CHAPTER TWO

HAVING left Brenda luxuriating in the aftermath of what she called "passion," Jim Redwood, dressed in the uniform of a Lieutenant (j.g.), walked several blocks with his two fine leather suitcases, before call-

ing a taxi and asking to be taken to the Merchant's Club. To the clerk at the desk he gave the card scribbled by Terton, the president of The First National. Any room and bath would do fine. Mr. Terton had been tops. He needed time to look for an apartment.

After going up with his bags, and unpacking, Redwood walked over to the office building where he had rented a furnished suite. A man was working on the door, with the lettering: James Edgeworth Redwood—Investment Consultant.

He went inside, noted the small outer office and the big inner one. Then he sat down at the comfortable chair before the flat desk. The phone had not been disconnected. Calling the company, he placed an order for an insertion in the new telephone book and found he could keep the relinquished number. The fellow working on the door told him the address of the best stationery store in town and he immediately ordered several hundred sheets of bonded letter paper and envelopes.

As for a secretary, she would have to be local. Since he intended to maintain only a front of business, she wouldn't be fooled, so he must do without a girl. If anyone should start to wonder why one wasn't around, he would say poor Thelma was ill and he was waiting for her recovery instead of replacing her. Thelma, not bad! He was a bit vain about his quick powers at lying. And as to stocks and bonds, he had worked in his dad's office until those bum checks had driven him out of town. His father had died of a heart attack, brought on by the anxiety over his son's illegal dealings, and left what little estate there was to his sister. He had no ethics or morals whatsoever. He had been born with the instincts of the wolf pack, with no consideration for the weaker in the pack, male or female. Because of his handsome face and appealing personality, the female had always been fair game for him. Why try confidence tricks on men when women eat right out of your hand with a little gentle persuasion?

Leaving his office, Jim walked down to the office of the Bordain News Dispatch and asked to see the managing editor. He was ushered into the office of Matt Drew. His officer's uniform certainly worked magic, he thought to himself.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"Mr. Drew, I'm Jim Edgeworth Redwood, a newcomer to town. I'm only wearing my uniform because I wish to have it on tomorrow morning for the Merston's funeral. I was shocked to learn of their death. I intended to look them up right away, not that I knew them, but I met their son, Frank, in the war. He was a flier on one of the

flat-tops in the Pacific while I was doing special duty there, but don't mention that in your paper. I wanted to talk to them about their hero son. Now they're gone."

"But they do have a lovely daughter, Miss Bonnie Merston."

Redwood let that go by as if he had not heard the remark.

"Will you be in town long, Mr. Redwood?"

"Perhaps, but I don't know as yet. I'm taking temporary offices in the Wheeling Building. I'm an investment consultant. However, don't mention that."

The managing editor smiled. "Well, what do you want mentioned?"

Jim answered disarmingly. "I trust your discretion. Just play up what a hero Frank Merston was and that the country lost a fine example of young American manhood. Say that he was a shining light to his fellow fliers, and he went to a glorious death in the line of duty."

Out of the corner of his left eye, Redwood saw a stenog taking down every word in shorthand. She stared at him as if he were something out of a book, not realizing that he was quite as unreal.

Thanking the newspaper man, Redwood left the office and headed for a bar and a drink before lunch.

The stage pas partly set. The newspaper would be seen that evening by Bonnie Merston. She would know that an officer friend of her dear, deceased brother was in the city, and would attend the funeral. Jim Redwood didn't believe in surprises until he was ready to supply them. This was a job that needed soft handling.

When the little funeral procession reached the Royalton Cemetery near the city limits, it wound its way to where fresh dirt had been dug. A dark clad figure, head bent reverently, stood not at the newly dug graves, but beside them, where a white tomb had already been erected for the Merston's war hero son.

Jim Redwood's right hand was held across his chest, holding his uniform hat. At last, there was a stir about him. The scattered couples approached, led by Bonnie Merston.

She wore neither rouge nor lipstick, though her mouth was pink as a dewy rose. Jim saw that she was tall—taller than most girls—with long, slim, shapely legs. She was high-breasted, thus giving a long line to the hips. If those tired lines were banished from her face, she would be beautiful. She possessed a fine bone structure that would endure after the first fragrance of youth. Her blue eyes, now veiled with her long lashes, were big and wide spread.

The mourners came toward the grave. The minister opened his book for the final words before burial. Half turning, Jim Redwood glanced shrewdly, sucking in the perfume of her movement. Yes, that was it, the grace of movement—something some women were not born with. There wasn't a young man present, a result of the fact that Bonnie had been sheltered by a neurotic mother and educated by private tutors. Odd as it might be in this world of forced growths, this blossom was overdue in opening.

Jim kept his pose until the services were over and waited until all the others had approached Bonnie Merston with their condolences. Then he approached her shyly, hat in hand, the spring breeze ruffling the waves in his brown hair.

"Miss Merston," he began, almost in a whisper, "I am a perfect stranger to you. The only reason that I break in on your grief is that I was a friend of your brother's."

Her eyes had that peculiar opaque and fathomless quality. She regarded him a moment and then forced a smile in a childish way.

"I—I read your card with the flowers. And isn't that your little wreath on my brother's grave? That is certainly proof of your thoughtfulness. I read about you in the newspaper last night. Very little, of course. The account says you are very reticent and modest and refuse to talk about your past war record."

Jim grinned, boyishly. "Let's not talk about me, Miss Merston. In a few days I should like very much to call on you. I believe I may be of practical aid to you in all the confusion that has descended upon you in this tragedy. I am much older than you, and I think the role of older brother might fit me nicely, that is . . ." He stopped short in a kind of confusion.

She stepped forward and her right hand, in a black glove, touched his hands, clasped before him.

"This is one of the nicest things I have ever heard, Mr. Redwood."

"There is one request that I would like to make. Before I leave, I would like you to think of me as *Jim* Redwood. And now, I shall leave you for a few days until the shock has subsided and you can look forward to the future. You can't avoid it, you know. I'd like to help."

He saluted with dignity. A faint color flushed the wonderful ivory of her high cheek bones, accenting the oval of her face.

Yes, that was it, he reflected, as he walked briskly to the little second-hand convertible he had bought last night. Leave 'em quick with a definite impression and something to think about. Boy, that

babe looks as if she had the breastworks of a Greek statue. That front isn't held up with a silk and wicker frame. And those legs. She must have been kept in a corral. If she ever got to the horse show, there'd be a crowd of bidders. This show has to be played quiet—the gentleman game—better known as the older brother. Move fast with a mature dame, slow with one like this who is just beginning to feel her oats.

Thus, behind the fine exterior which nature had given him, Jim Redwood thought about his profession. He had, aside from his appearance, this advantage in dealing with a girl, or a woman, over a man with fine principles: he was able to study his subject, the feminine sex, without illusions. Then he filled in detail knowledge about how to play on their emotions. The ideal approach was not merely the animal, not at first, but a combination of the small boy, the brother, the lover and even the father. That made the victim think she was getting everything in one package.

Jim went back to his office. At lunch, he attended the meeting of the Rotary Club, as their guest. The president of the bank introduced him to its members. He gave a rousing talk on the new Government Bond Drive about to be launched. He stated that if the local committee in charge would give him a list of prospects to be visited, he would be glad to offer his services freely.

Back at the club, he took off his uniform, swearing that he had worn it for the last time. From now on there must be nothing in the slightest degree dangerous. He would play these next few scenes safely.

Brenda was, possibly, his only mistake. But devoted as she was to him, that might even work out fine. She had an appeal that she didn't realize, far beyond the fact that she was sold to him body and soul. Brenda's appeal was that she adored him, fully knowing that he was utterly worthless. He could go unmasked. Unconsciously, she had paid him the final tribute of mad love without illusion. After fourteen years of it, at thirty four, one could grow tired of building illusions.

Jim went to a bar and had a couple of drinks. Thinking, aside from business angles, bored him. To be introspective, he thought, was the weakness of flabby, fat women who wrote love stories and men with high pitched voices, who learned about sex from Noel Coward plays.

Back in her spacious house, now empty, except for servants, Bonnie was informing her voice culture teacher that she would have to post-

pone her lessons for a while at least. She just 'didn't feel up to them.

"True, you will not have to ever sing for a living," he said, a little sadly as he turned to depart, and Bonnie was to remember his parting words.

The house was very quiet. There was a kind of silence that seemed death-like. Everything about it suggested those who had gone. There were her father's books; the paintings of the modern school her mother had loved. She also missed her brother, even though she had no memento to remind her of him.

How nice, she thought, of Jim Redwood to take that little wreath to her brother's grave. How sweet he was and what a silly remark that he was too old. Too old for what? Too old to be with her as a man is with a woman? It rather wounded her vanity. Was it only past friendship for her brother that prompted him to offer his help? Would he call? She found herself answering calls eagerly. But she did not hear his voice for three whole days. That was all part of Jim's calculations.

About five o'clock, the telephone rang. Mrs. Bellows, the housekeeper, informed Bonnie that a Mr. Redwood was calling.

"Hello, Miss Merston, this is Jim Redwood speaking."

"Oh, I'm glad you called. I thought you were just being polite and had forgotten . . ."

"No one in his right mind could ever forget you. I thought you might need a little cheering up. Nothing wild or hilarious, of course. If you don't have any other plans, I'd like to take you out for the evening. We can have dinner at some quiet roadhouse. Would you like that?"

"I'd love it. Would six-thirty do?"

"Yes, and wear that same black outfit I saw you in. There's nothing that compliments a blonde's beauty more than black. I'll see you later."

He hung up abruptly. In half an hour, a messenger arrived with a box containing one gardenia.

The enclosed card read: "Please wear this over your heart. Jim."

Excitedly, she started to dress. After experimenting with various hairdo's, she finally decided upon the coronal effect—a girlish style her brother had loved. She dressed carefully in the same outfit that she wore to the funeral. After deftly applying her make-up, she paused and threw an admiring glance at herself in the full-length mirror. She seemed pleased with what she saw.

Throwing her mink cape over her shoulders, she went out and waited

on the porch. Just then, Jim Redwood drove up. He got out of the convertible, and as he walked toward Bonnie she noticed the handsome gabardine suit he wore. He was a *smoothie*, all right!

Bonnie motioned to the gardenia and smiled. "I like the idea, Jim, of just one distinctive flower."

"Good, I think orchids and price go too much together. Hurry and jump in. I'm hoarse and thirsty from selling that new issue of government bonds. Besides, I know you must be starving."

He allowed her to get into the seat beside him without touching her. Then he drove, carefully, and talked impersonally of topics of the day. He was cool, entertaining, as he might be to a young male companion.

Some miles out, at a roadhouse run by a French couple, he helped Bonnie out and followed her into a reconstructed old farm dwelling. There were possibly twenty tables, checker-covered. Their host, a smiling middle aged man with a Chef's hat, took them to a table at a mullioned window and drew back Bonnie's chair. Jim ordered a dry martini for himself, sweet sherry for his companion, and a couple of porterhouse steaks, with vegetables, and coffee.

"A little sherry will be an appetizer for you, my dear," he said. She smiled and nodded.

A few couples had already arrived, and more drifted in. There was a low hum of conversation. Here good cooking and food were appreciated. Bonnie saw the customers were all middle aged people. She heard a low laugh, a kind of a soft gurgle, and saw that over Jim's face crossed an indescribable flash of annoyance.

Jim knew that laugh, and he saw the two before Bonnie did. Brenda was dressed in a spring model, of blue, with long skirts that swirled about her, and a plunging neckline that gave just the enticing half inch of rounded flesh, on either side. Her hair was in braids, at the back, tied with a little red ribbon.

As she swept by, laughing at something said by her companion, Edward Terton, the bank official, her eyes met Jim's without recognition. Violet perfume wafted to the table. To Bonnie she seemed overwhelmingly feminine, in an aggressive way, a little fragrant with her charms. She wasn't experienced enough to know that Brenda was an old hand at using sex as a challenge, provocatively, as a lure.

Terton spoke, without stopping: "Hello, Redwood." He nodded to Bonnie, with raised eyebrows of surprise.

"Do you know the lady, Jim?" Bonnie asked, timidly.

"No, and I didn't think they had her kind here. She invites a masculine strip tease with her glance, but you wouldn't understand. I wouldn't want you to understand. You should be shielded from all the vulgarity of this world."

"But can I be shielded, Jim? Aren't there men who find a woman like that attractive?"

"Oh, yes, she appeals in an obvious way, everything on the counter. But here comes our food. Let's enjoy it. I'll open the window and let out that perfume."

Jim saw Terton walking across the room toward them. He arose and shook the man's hand, but didn't invite him to be seated. The other was a bit confused, but determined.

"I'm escorting what may be an important customer, a young widow, Mrs. Brenda Matthews, who is making her home in this city. I wonder if Miss Merston would like to join our table?"

"I'm sorry," said Jim, slowly, "but we give a wrong impression. This is not a social evening for my young client, and myself. I thought it best to break her in on the finances she will handle, with my aid, away from the lonely confines of her home. It is previous, of course, as the will has not been probated. But as a friend of her brother's I have more or less appointed myself to take his place. You understand Mr. Terton—and I shall seek your aid, too, in the future, because of your splendid experience and conservative approach."

Terton beamed. He handled stocks and bonds, for bank clients, and cleaned up nicely through advice really profitable to them.

"I should have known better, Redwood, and thanks. I'm putting you up for membership at the club."

"I appreciate it. A fine place for a bachelor to stag it."

Then Terton addressed himself to Bonnie in a few well chosen clichés. As he left, Jim boiled in anger. This might not be any of Brenda's doing, of course, but women were peculiar. The idea of mixing the two—with a possible involuntary slip by Brenda—revolted his sense of fitness. Everything was going smoothly, would continue smoothly, if he kept the reins and took things slowly.

He smiled at Bonnie, and she tapped his right hand with the tip of her fingers, soft and delicate as the touch of butterflies.

"Thank you, Jim, I did not want to meet that woman, now, or any time. And all you said was what I hoped—that you would be my advisor, for I need advice badly. Our aged family lawyer should have

retired long ago. I'm sure his office runs itself. But can you afford—"

Jim's eyes flashed, he meant them to do so, and his expression became stern.

"Don't hurt my feelings, Bonnie, or you will take away my pleasure in helping you. If anyone will make anything it will be that animated adding machine, who is only escorting that women because she must be a prospective customer—for good bonds, of course. He has a feel for cats and dogs and senses them on sight."

"Cats and dogs?" she asked, curious.

"Cats and dogs are what we investment counselors call bonds and stocks that are unsafe—sold by blue sky promoters. That is, they would sell the blue sky if they could. So many states have what are called 'Blue Sky Laws' to stop them from doing just that. When doubtful issues are on the market we sometimes say it is raining cats and dogs."

She laughed, a low little laugh that was delightful.

"You know so much, brother Jim. I feel so safe in your hands."

He nodded. Yes he knew quite a lot. Once he had worked for two weeks in the boiler room, as it was called, of a high pressure oil company. He telephoned, long distance, all day, hour after hour, sometimes making a hundred and fifty a day, on commissions. But the strain was too much, even if his voice hadn't given out.

His point made, he changed the subject. He only knew as much about her brother as he had read in the newspapers. Now he drew her out to talk about him, at length, as a fortune teller draws out a client, gets a world of information, and then feeds it back to the sitter's astonishment.

When Bonnie became curious about his own war experiences he was reticent, saying that it was mostly hush-hush stuff, P.G. 3, that must be shuttered in the files.

For dessert Jim ordered Bonnie a light pastry, skipped it himself, as he didn't care for sweets. He ordered a double brandy, then sipped it slowly and with relish.

He tried to feel pleased that Terton had walked over. He had planted that financial advisor line in a swell way: as an excuse, perhaps, for Bonnie being seen out when she might have been expected to keep close mourning.

Though it was early, Jim took Bonnie directly home. He resisted

her invitation to come in for a while, saying another time would be better. He would have a hard day tomorrow working on the government bond drive.

She put out her hand timidly. He took it an instant, pressed the fingers and the palm between his own hands, in a firm and masculine way.

He smiled, looking deep into her lovely eyes, turned, and walked to his convertible, knowing that she was looking after him.

Driving to the garage, which was near the club, Jim wished for an instant that Brenda was out of the way, for good, and that he could go along in a legitimate way, marry Bonnie, and not be forced to give her a rotten deal. But you couldn't change things. Brenda was not only on deck but she had altogether too much on him. Nothing would deter her from killing him if he tried a double cross. He knew what she called her temperament. But, after all, he would eat his cake and have it, too. He would get Bonnie, which was quite what he wanted and with her lack of sophistication and virginity he knew she could pall mighty quickly. Brenda was his kind, and it was foolish, to think of overturning the apple cart.

Back at the club he went directly to his room, and at eleven o'clock he got the call he had expected.

"Hello, this you, Jim? This is you know who."

"Yep, I know who. But didn't I tell you not to telephone me here?"

"Perhaps. But there can be too much regulation. I'm not taking any graduate finishing school work, my pet. I'm out her in my most daring negligee, the yellow one, having sent the gent home with a discreet and lady-like touch of the hands, and no invite inside. But that doesn't mean that I don't want a caller. In fact I'd dote upon one. I've been neglected and I insist on your coming out and doing some home work that needs doing."

"Okay," Jim drawled, "and if you break open a bottle of Scotch wait until I get there before swilling. This is the last time I'll answer a ring here, but I don't blame you for wanting to know how things are going."

"And don't blame me for wanting you, Jim," she said, with mock coyness. He heard her laugh as she hung up the receiver.

Jim grinned as he prepared to go out. Brenda was hot stuff, she gave tobasco sauce to sex, and after a certain time a man did need seasoning. But from now on, with the road ahead all set, with no

detours, both of them must watch their step. The jackpot was worth it.

He drove quickly from the garage. As he stopped in front of Brenda's bungalow he was not thinking of her as much as he was of Bonnie. Reflecting upon her white beauty, he told himself confidently: "To the victor belong the spoils."

CHAPTER THREE

JIM and Bonnie were married late in July, and for several weeks she was in a drugged dream of happiness. Her husband wanted her that way, for he had business in mind. He had waited until the will had been probated before having her give him power of attorney, which shifted everything into his hands. Afterwards, she signed a number of harmless looking "transfers", which really transferred her stocks and bonds and financial holdings to his name and ownership.

The floating cash was in the bank in a joint account. They could both sign checks, and that was all right for the time being.

At the bank Jim had made some good business for Terton. Not that this was positively necessary, but he wanted the bank as financial headquarters, and he might need the man, a valuable associate, in the future. But he hoped not. The Merston estate he found to be one of those fine conservative fortunes that you never see written up in the newspaper; the type that has endured for several generations. The fortune, Jim hoped, would continue good, if not in her hands.

On the first of August Jim told Bonnie at breakfast that he was called to New York, but would be back in a couple of days. He would take a plane from the airport.

"A little business. I have a cousin, Bill Tremper, a kid I've adopted and always get out of trouble. He is in a jam. I may bring him back for a couple of weeks. You won't mind having him around?"

He got up, walked around the little table, kissed her on the back of the neck, then on the shoulder. Then as she looked sideways, touched his lips to the corner of her mouth.

"You are so sweet and precious, I hate to leave you for a day," he said, softly. "Get a load of love stored up for my return."

"I have it stored up, now," she murmured, flushing, for his very touch was magic to her.



"You're so lovely," Jim told Bonnie, "that I hate to leave you for a day. Get a load of love stored up for my return." "I have it now," she murmured.
(Specially posed by professional models)

Bonnie looked as if marriage agreed with her, as indeed it did, for her blue eyes sparkled, and she wore a million dollar smile, that melted into a whole million dollar rapture when he took her into his arms and she settled into a bliss that was too wonderful to end.

"But you are thoughtful, of others," she said, "and I wouldn't have you otherwise. My wonderful husband!"

Still standing behind her, Jim put both hands about her neck and fondled her for an instant. She shivered and pulled aside.

"No, no, Jim, not if you are going to be away for several days! Don't tease a poor girl."

"Better not get myself worked up," he said, with a laugh, and returned to his breakfast.

Jim did not take much in his bag to New York, and what he did take was for a blind, for he only intended to be there for several hours. The city was dangerous to him. He would take a train to Philly, stay there over night, and then return home.

After arriving at La Guardia Field, and taking a taxi to the Broadway district, Jim walked to a shabby office building off Broadway, in the upper forties, climbed two flights of stairs, and knocked on a door with the legend: "Sam Partinton, Attorney At Law."

A stout and shrewd eyed, middle aged man unlocked the rickety door.

"Eh, you? Hope you are not in trouble. I'm sticking to divorces, you know, no crime stuff."

"Ah, shut your trap, Sam. I've come to drop dough in your fat lap."

"Okay, come in, and turn that key behind you."

Jim found himself in a frowsy office with which he was familiar. He had worked a few times on framed divorce cases with Sam, with little pay, and messy and hysterical women. Seated across from the lawyer he put it bluntly.

"I got two grand, one and a half for you, if you can provide a licensed dick for a week, with a camera and a flashlight that'll work, and—"

"The other five century notes?"

"You had a good looking young actor, once, for a high class society case—name of Bill Tremper. You can see he came from a nice family—and with no more scruples than a shark. This is a job worth that kind of dough."

"That is all clear." He called to another room: "Hey, Mable, put down that movie mag and call Bill Tremper at The Central Arms.

Tell him there is swell dough over here for a week's engagement or so."

Sam turned to Jim Redwood: "I know he died with a flop out of town last week. Waited for three months and got two weeks work, and only that because Equity insisted upon a bond. He acts well when he touches me for a five spot. Actual tears come into his eyes. I saw him once, in a turkey a wise operator *had* to bring into New York, even though it cost money—the guy had drawn down ninety grand from a group of investors, and lost most of it on the horses. He had to make some showing, so he leased four walls of a barn theatre for a week and let the production be seen until carted to the warehouse. I thought Bill was lousy—but the Annie Oakleys were free. Anyway, the lad will be good for your principal. Who do you represent, kid?"

"Myself," said Jim. "Yes, and this will be like taking candy from a baby. What I want is to frame her and then have her so panic-stricken and shamed she will blow town. In a legitimate way I have everything she ever owned, now. But I have an old broad I can't get rid of and two dames don't mix. I was thinking of that formula we played up near Greenwich way. I don't know if you have a name for it, anyway the same will do. You can trust Tremper on future black-mail?"

"Sure, he has no guts when not playing a role. I suppose you want to take him back with you?"

"Yep, that's it."

Jim took out a roll of bills, counted out hundreds, which the attorney also counted, and pocketed.

"I'll finance Tremper. He's supposed to be my cousin. I'm bringing him into my home, while he gets out of a jam. I'll pay him off. He does his piece right and then he can blow, or shall we say exit."

"Okay, the ham can act swell, off stage. The footlights do odd tricks to him."

"Has he clothes?"

"Sure, even when he doesn't eat. How is Brenda?"

"A little over-weight, otherwise okay. We plan to get hitched when this is over. I'm going to retire, be respectable, while I still have my looks and can enjoy life. It was before my time, but I heard some of the older con men speak about Dapper Dan Collins, the king of the lady killers, who went up the river not long ago, broke, moth-eaten, declaring he was just an old bum. A woman once hocked a fortune in jewels for him. Another, after a quarrel, nearly killed herself. He

had a string of red hot babies working for him all over town. They rooked Johns and he was on the receiving end, to throw the dough away at Arnold Rothstein's gambling spots. What an end for a fashion plate. I don't want anything like that, Sam."

"You'll be the first, then, who was woman bait."

A knock came at the door. Sam opened up, and Bill Tremper made what he called an entrance, cane and all. He was tall, with fine if weak features, and a professional Dixie drawl.

"Hello, Sam. That you, Jim? Haven't been seeing you. Away?"

"Bill, Jim here has a job for you outa town, worth five century notes. You can have one to get yourself out of hock, and town."

"When do I get the other four?"

"After the frame—and you must resist sleeping with the babe. You ought to be able to make 'em while they are awake."

Tremper yawned to show that he didn't like the joke.

"Send over seventy to the hotel, Sam, that'll be all. I have to pack and they'll need the sight of some money."

"Mable, come in here."

A faded blonde entered, and gasped at the sight of the money on the desk.

"Some of my long owed salary, as I live and breathe."

"Sure, Mable, you get fifty. And take this seventy over to the dump where Tremper lives. Wait downstairs for him to pack, and lead him back here. If he does anything out of turn punch him in the nose."

She deftly scooped the money into a pocketbook, pulled the young actor by the arm.

"Come, laddie, with mother, we have a pay-off job to do."

Sam turned to Jim after the two had left. "Never trust an actor with anything but stage money. He'll go south any time. This way he'll play straight till the pay-off. You can mail me mine in a cashier's check."

The two shook hands on it. Both trusted each other—since each was in the other's power. Jim knew enough to have Sam lose his license to practice. Sam could have put Jim in jail in three states. Thus they shared perfect trust and confidence.

Landing in town, after an over night stay in Philadelphia, Jim took Tremper in a taxi to his home. Their story was all set, and at long last Jim had given in to the actor and allowed him to talk show business. Otherwise, as he said, he would not be in character. The jam

that accounted for his visit was to be wreathed in mystery, woman trouble not in good taste to be discussed.

Bonnie greeted Jim as if he had been long gone on a dangerous mission and now had returned in one piece. She gathered him into her arms, smothering him with kisses. Then she turned to Tremper, her ivory skin in a lovely pink flush, and apologized. She greeted him with the welcome due her husband's cousin.

Bill Tremper was like a fellow who had fallen into something very soft. He was easy to have around. Jim made it a point to have the three of them often seen together in public, dining out at the hotels, and attending the summer barn theatre, where Tremper thought he might promote himself for a job.

The licensed dick that Sam sent to the city called upon Jim at his office.

"Next Saturday night is the time," Jim told him, "for you to be waiting near my house with your camera and inside flash equipment. The servants will be out for the week-end. I'll show up about midnight, and I'll have a couple of responsible citizens along. I'm going to leave Tremper to entertain the wife, you understand."

"I guess I understand," said the thin-lipped operative.

"You understand enough," Jim told him. "This isn't the first job you've been on for Sam?"

"No. Getting pictures of guys and gals in bed, with little on except their imagination, is old stuff to me. One thing. Get that bird to throw the covers back. The more you get a Jane raw the better it looks for the print."

Bill Tremper was all ready for Saturday night, and he said that he would keep Bonnie company while Jim went out for a business conference. This was on the level. Some new approaches had been made to manufacturers, on factory sites, by the Chamber of Commerce. The companies wanted to do local financing, and Jim had offered to sit in. Terton, who was interested, as the big local banker, was overjoyed, for when money went through his hands some of it always stuck to the palms.

The windows were open, and a little breeze made it more comfortable than usual. Bonnie sat at the window, overlooking a back porch, and a formal garden. Bill lounged on the rug, Greenwich Village style, telling her about his stage experience. He had done everything except make a hit. Somehow there was a conspiracy against him. Either a producer had a down on him, a leading woman killed

his lines, a critic roasted him or the dramatist cut his part at the last moment—there was always something.

He excused himself, went out in the kitchen and mixed some real lemon extract, water, and ice, in a pitcher, and then took out of his back pocket an envelope containing a white powder. This was the works: a sleeping potion, not too strong, not too weak; a knock-out, complete, for four hours. After that, whoever took it could be awakened. The doc, who was known to Sam, gave no prescription, but charged ten fish whenever he handed a dose across.

Bill Tremper brought in the lemonade and a tall glass.

"I fixed some special lemonade for you, Bonnie. I know you'll like it."

He poured out a glass and handed it to her.

"I'll go hustle up a bottle of ale."

"That was thoughtful of you, Bill. I do feel somewhat thirsty. Hearing you talk about show business is so fascinating."

He watched her take dainty sips, well pleased. His four century notes were on the way. Going back to the kitchen, he opened a bottle of ale, poured himself a glass, and came back to seat himself at her feet.

"There is no business like show business for a man, when it is good. But it is better for a gal, with a little talent and some beauty. You take those orchestras—the singer's voice doesn't sound so good, on the radio, but she has the appearance for the suckers, leans forward and gives 'em a peep at the flesh, and that puts her over. You would be swell, Bonnie. Not much voice, but enough. The hips beat a voice."

"That sounds a bit vulgar, Bill. Certainly a woman sells more than her sex."

"Sometimes. Generally she sells a bit of that before she gets to the front. But I'm a tough, uncouth character, Bonnie, and you are not used to the cold, hard world, where a gal has to battle, with every weapon in her armory, that may appeal."

"It all sounds a bit disgusting."

"Yes, unless she has rare talent, and comes up the hard way, life is like that in the profession for a femme. But let me fill your glass, I guess my talent is as a lemonade mixer."

"Yes, it tastes fine. The dry taste of the lemon seems to make me more thirsty."

Suddenly she yawned, and put two fingers to her lips.

"Here, take another drink, and lie down on the divan, if you wish. I'll go over and play something on the piano."

Bedtime Blonde

He watched her intently, as she drank. This was it. The stage was set. She yawned again, half staggered to her feet, wove toward the divan and threw herself down upon it. Bill stopped playing, waited. Her breathing became heavier and heavier, as the sleeping drug overcame her.

There was plenty of time, but he waited only a half an hour before he walked over to the divan and picked her up. He found her heavier than he had expected. There was a short walk to the stairs, and up it he carried his perfumed bundle of framed bliss, a lock of her hair tickling his cheeks. He took her into the room she shared with Jim and placed her on the big double bed. Then eagerly he began to undress her. He took off her slippers, stockings, and dress, using her awkwardly, as if an inanimate clothes horse in a shop window. He had great difficulty with the short girdle. At long last, he had everything off her body but a thin silk bra, which he unhooked to allow her full young breasts to show.

How beautiful she was, and how helpless. He was overcome with desire for her but still he didn't have the guts to rape a helpless set-up.

He managed to get the bed clothes down, then he covered her only with a sheet. In his own room, he changed to pajamas. From a wine chest he brought a bottle of Scotch, opened it, mixed high balls, and drank both of them. He carried the bottle of Scotch to the bedroom, spilled several ounces intentionally, on the rug, so the fumes would rise, and then he began a little steady drinking. He needed the money, but now for the first time in his life he was somewhat ashamed of himself. That would pass, he knew, for he was a heel at heart, and realized it. The money was real, and it would carry him along for a while.

The scandal? That wouldn't hurt him with the summer theatre. A male heart breaker was always hot stuff.

Time passed, and slowly, as he got himself more than half befuddled. But he knew his own capacity.

Meantime Jim was also watching the clock. The meeting was a long one, and then, Terton, and a fellow named Saunders, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, proposed that they adjourn for a few social hoists in the bar of the hotel. As the party was breaking up, Jim took Terton and Saunders aside.

"Fellows, I've been playing along with you, for your mutual benefit. Now I have a favor I want to ask of you. After all, give and take is my motto. This is personal. I want you two to hop into my car with

Bedtime Blonde

me on something that may never come to court. I don't think it will, but I need a couple of responsible citizens, outstanding men. Will you help?"

They nodded, mystified. But both anticipated future financial gains. Jim had seen to that—always promise a favor before you ask one.

It was before midnight when Jim pulled his car in before his door. He noted the sedan parked a bit down the street. So, after he had unlocked the front door, he left it ajar behind him. He pressed the button that lighted the lower floor of the house.

"This way, gentlemen," he beckoned.

Jim heard the door close behind him. The detective was now inside, carrying his camera and bulb frame, for an interior photo.

Up the stairs went the three men, Jim at the rear, and the detective following. The door to the bedroom was ajar. Jim coughed. That was the signal for Tremper to begin singing in a high pitched voice. In a single motion he pulled back the sheet from Bonnie, and there she lay, clad only in her pink shirt. Tremper, glass in hand, sat down on the edge of the bed.

Jim threw open the door.

"What the hell," stammered Terton.

"Just step aside, gentlemen," said the detective. He elbowed the three to one side, and took his picture. Then he quickly retreated from the room, and the house as well.

Jim walked quickly over, slapped Tremper on the side of the face, but not hard. The actor squealed as if in pain.

"Get out of my house, you rotten heel!"

Tremper took a last swallow from the bottle and beat it as quickly as he could. He would move at once to the hotel. The four hundred would go in the mail to him in the morning.

Here was where the drug, and the length of potency, must be tested. Jim slapped Bonnie hard across the face. She opened her eyes, sleepy, but conscious. Looking beyond her husband, she saw the other two men.

"What—what are these men doing in our room, Jim, and why am I in bed—like this—without my night robe?"

"You cheap little tramp. You're in bed because you've been playing around with Bill. A detective just took a picture of you with Bill sitting on the edge of the bed in his pajamas. You both got good and drunk. The place stinks of Scotch. So you are the cheap whore I married!"

Bedtime Blonde

He turned to the two men. "You can go, now, fellows. Take my car. I think I'll stay here, and get drunk, too."

"I don't blame you," said Terton, his hungry eyes never leaving Bonnie's body until she pulled the sheet up to her neck. Horror loomed in her eyes. She didn't understand, very naturally couldn't understand.

"I don't think I'll need the testimony of my friends. This is a case, I wager, that will never be contested, in court."

As the men left, muttering, swearing, amazed, Jim turned to Bonnie. He noted with pleasure that Bill had taken the solitaire from her finger, while she slept. He had already got her jewel box, before leaving for the meeting. Now for the final send-off.

"I'll let you sleep here tonight, Bonnie, but out you go in the morning. You are in no fit condition to leave right now, so I'll lock you in. I'll open the door in the morning. To think that I loved you, you shabby little tart!"

"Jim, Jim is this all a nightmare? I don't understand. I was drinking lemonade downstairs—I became sleepy. I reclined on the divan fully clothed—"

"I find you here playing nuptial games with my cousin. Good night, and I hope I never see your face again—unless you have the guts to meet me in court."

He closed and locked the door behind him, and the terrible racking sobs that he heard bothered him not at all.

Downstairs he telephoned the managing editor on the local morning newspaper, gave him the entire story.

"First thing in the morning a summons will be given her, returnable at the first divorce trials in early fall. If you want to interview my wife you better have a reporter at the railroad station tomorrow, from eleven o'clock on. I think she'll be taking a train out of town."

He hung up. This was one time he didn't need one drink, he needed plenty of them. It wasn't that conscience troubled him, it was the worry about some slip-up or other. How can you count on a gal drinking lemonade? What if the slap had failed to bring her out of the doped sleep? You never can depend on the timing of a drug. But everything had gone off swell. In the kitchen he made a double Scotch, and toasted himself, not knowing anyone better to toast. He finally went to sleep on the divan.

In the morning he was up, early, and found the morning paper on the front stoop. The divorce story was all over the front page. He

carried the newspaper upstairs, opened the door to the bedroom a few inches, thrust in the paper, then quickly locked the door.

Downstairs he dressed and left the house. He flagged a taxi and went downtown to get the proper papers ready to be served on Bonnie. He would use a professional summons server.

For Bonnie, horror had succeeded horror, and hysteria had left her drained of all feeling. In this fit of apathy all her natural reasoning powers deserted her. She had too little knowledge of the world—and none of the underworld—to realize she had been the victim of a brutal, bare-faced frame, and that the worst thing she could do was to flee. She should have gone downtown and engaged the services of a good criminal lawyer. An investigation could have opened plenty of holes—Redwood's past, if investigated, was filled with them, and ugly ones.

All this Bonnie understood later, and bitterly, but now she was like a child exposed to cruel and inhuman treatment impossible to understand. She did not even think of fighting. She packed some clothes in a suitcase, and in it put her jewel case, containing only costume jewelry. She marched from the house, pale and without make-up, and walked four blocks before she could get a cab and be taken down to the bank.

Terton was polite but firm, in answering her questions. She had, of her own free will, in a number of transactions, transferred all her real estate, and bonds and stocks, to her husband's ownership. Wives often did just that—and husbands, too. How much was in the mutual bank account? Terton telephoned the record office. Six hundred and fifty dollars. And there were two hundred dollars in a small savings account that had been started for her as a child. Altogether, with interest on the last, she had about eight hundred dollars. Yes, she could write a check. She did so and was given the money. Terton was cold and distant. To him she was nothing but a pretty bum.

Outside the bank a nondescript individual approached her.

"Mrs. Bonnie Redwood?"

"Yes."

"Here is a divorce summons, returnable in sixty days, at the first meeting of the District Court."

He offered her the stiff papers and she put them into her pocketbook.

At the railroad station she bought a ticket for the first small city that she could spell out in the time table. As she left the window a young man took off a stained felt hat.

"Mrs. Redwood, I'm a reporter from the morning rag. We have your husband's story. We'd like to have your side of it—if you have anything to say."

"No, no. I have nothing to say at all. Not at this time. I just must get away from this torture."

"May I ask if you will defend your husband's divorce suit?"

"What shall I use to defend myself with?" she asked, bitterly, and then with the back of her right hand she wiped away her tears.

He watched her pick up her suitcase and walk toward the stairway leading down to the railroad platform. No. 3 would be due going west in ten minutes. A very forlorn figure, thought the reporter, and damned if she registered as a tramp to him, but all the evidence was against her. And the running away—that looked bad. He went to telephone to the evening paper.

"Mrs. Redwood asks, what has she got to defend herself with?" he told the rewrite man, on the line. "I think she has a lot any judge would give a second look at, and mebbe go further, in his chambers, if she played the game right. But the foolish babe is taking it on the lam—and the lam always looks like guilt. I found from the ticket agent she bought a ticket to a town in Indiana. I'll get the A.P. man there to get a line on her. But I bet we never hear of that dame again."

CHAPTER FOUR

BONNIE waited until the woman who ran the lodging house had started on her morning shopping. She would want a week's rent in advance—*today*. Bonnie had two dollars. In only three weeks she was down to that. No more silly and inexperienced than a dozen other women, she had fallen for the advertisement, in the Dearburn Register, and invested most of what she had in an interior decoration shop. The promoter had left town, leaving some unbought furniture in a shop on which the first month's rent was still unpaid.

Walking quickly, Bonnie went to a one arm joint and had a breakfast of orange juice and coffee. She bought a pack of cigarettes, having acquired the habit of smoking.

Leaving the lunch room, Bonnie took a walk, going toward a little park that ever looked shabby, because of the bums who used the

benches. At first, when she had rented a room at the lodging house, Bonnie had walked there, in the evening, to be alone and miserable outside the barren confines of four walls. But to be alone was impossible, for more than two minutes. A man would slip beside her on the bench, and a voice would come: "Lonely, sister?" Or: "Do you mind if I smoke?" Or another remark to start a talk. She must look, she thought, like a cheap pick-up.

Strolling along, looking to neither right nor left, Bonnie was lost in her thoughts. "I mustn't look for any consideration," she concluded, "and instead of being a sucker again, I must make men my prey—and give them a laugh, or a fist, if they try to take advantage of their strength. I'm on my own—now I have to either go under, or win."

It was not so long ago that the thought of a cheap roadhouse would have given her a delicate shudder. But now the time for refinement was gone, with the last of her little money. Without hesitation she walked to the terminal, determined to go up against anything, however low and repulsive, in order to survive—and anyone who tried to stop her had better look out. The old Bonnie was amazingly changed, by necessity, into one hard and even possibly dangerous.

She took a bus out just beyond the city limits and so out of local police jurisdiction. The county authorities were open to reason, with a collector calling every week, so anything questionable was over the line. What she was answering, in person, was a little ad in the previous evening paper:

Singer wanted with appearance. Hours easy. Not member of Artists Guild. Apply to Mike Cameron, White Lights Roadhouse, Route 3, End of Line. Between ten & twelve, Thursday. No need to bring music.

Well, she had once had an expensive voice coach. She supposed she had appearance. At the end of route 3 the bus stopped, she left it to walk to a long, low building, beside what appeared to be a converted farm house. There was a big sign above the low building that spelled out: White Lights: Girls & Refreshment, Songs, Music, Dance. The place was hard and crude in the strong sunlight. Dust rose from her slippers as she went to the front door, opened it, and walked into a cool if yet smelly interior. There were odors of stale perfume,

beer, cigarette stubs. A porter who looked as if he had slept upon the floor was messing around with a broom and a dust-pan.

At one side was an empty bar. At the back was an elevated platform, with a piano. She saw a two by four dance floor. Chairs were piled up on tables. At night the place would have a ten-twenty-thirty appeal, with lights and music, and cheap sex. Now it was bare, sordid, and she shivered. But she supposed she must keep on eating. This was her only talent. Men were out. She didn't hate men; she loathed them, collectively and individually.

"The boss is in his office, at the back, at the right, Miss," said the porter, in a refined voice, which was unexpected.

Bonnie walked into a large office room. A genial Irishman sat behind a desk, and he did not rise as she entered.

"Hello, beautiful, what are you doing in my dump? You look too good for it. No mistake, I hope. You don't belong to the Artists Guild, do you?"

"No, I don't. Would it matter?"

"Sure. The union has gone respectable. It doesn't allow artists to mingle with guests—and what harm in that? The gals make money. No, don't get me wrong, they don't have to hustle here. They can sleep with their own sweet selves far as Mike Cameron is concerned. But I want the bar take helped, and every time, baby, you order a brandy, or a creme de menthe, or creme de cocoa, you are down for a quarter: they're all nawthin' but colored water. In one night you can make five bucks extra.

"The singing is easy, only you need short skirts—for a flash of flesh—and a sloping neckline down as near your navel as possible. Show a flash of your bobbies. You can get a room next door for ten bucks a week, and I throw in two meals here. Salary thirty a week. Now you have it all, rough and unrefined, but honest enough. You don't have to sell your pure white body unless you wanta—and I do my own bouncing if any customer wants too much of a cheap feel."

"But my ability to sing?"

"Who notices your singing? You have youth and looks. That is what the customers long for. You won't be here long. I lose all my gals. Some big butter and egg man grabs 'em and takes 'em away."

"If I go it will be under my own power," said Bonnie, dryly, "for I'd rather shoot your customers than stay with them."

"Oh, buy a gun, and shoot 'em if you must, I don't care. Just take them far enough away from my joint. Damn it, gal, I'm no whore

master. It is up to my gals how respectable they stay or don't stay. Anyone can buy a room next door. If you keep your door locked you'll be as safe as safe."

"Okay, when do I report?"

"Come back at four. My professor will drift in by then and go over a few numbers. He should have the reefer smoke outa him by that time. But Charlie Dean is great with the ivories, and the folks love his blue lines for *Frankie and Johnnie*, and *New Orleans Quarters*, and *Love Me But Never Leave Me*."

"You have what is left of a girl," said Bonnie, "and at least you are open and above board."

She went back to town, told the woman she was checking out, came back and got a room at the converted farmhouse, told one Mrs. Cameron she found there, that she was one of her husband's new girls. Mrs. Cameron introduced her to Sally and Betty and Nancy, all young, all husky voiced, all needing new make-ups, all tired-eyed but good natured and easy going. All were making good money, for they "doubled in brass," as they called it, from carney language, meaning doing two jobs at one time: the night club was a side line, it was their bed work that brought in the income. When Bonnie, hearing their talk about customers, chimed in to say she was a gal who always slept alone, Sally piped: "I'll do that, too, when I can afford it. Meantime I keep a big overgrown bum, on the side, and he always has the gimme, gimme."

At four Bonnie met Charlie Dean, thin and fragile in appearance. He once had been a good man with a swell combo, playing the hotels, but had become unreliable between reefers and brandy, and missed too many dates. Here he got by, passing the hat for the Professor, and any time he missed a night Cameron used the juke box and never dreamed of firing him.

"Hello, baby, you look fresh and pretty. What are you doing here, strictly from hunger?"

"Mighty near that."

"Stand by the piano. We'll go over a few numbers." After ten minutes of that: "Humph, your voice isn't bad, but your legs are better. Go to the dressing room and see if any of the revealing costumes fit you. Oh, don't crinkle your nose, they've all been to the cleaners. The show starts at nine o'clock. I want to see how you look in little."

Bonnie went to the dressing room, a long barn, with chairs and a mirror that ran along it, with make-up at each girl's place. At the

Bedtime Blonde

end she found an exposed rack, and a short dress, lace at the top, but a low bodice. She slipped it on, buckled it in at the waist.

Charlie Dean whistled: "I whistle like a wolf, sister, but I'm really a meek poodle. You look swell, with that ivory epidermis, and those legs are really something. Now get on the platform, toss the skirt a bit as you sing this western ditty—and let 'em get a flash of skin. Also, if you will reach behind and toss the skirt, and give 'em a glint at the fanny, all the better. They'll forget if you are singing or not. Now let's see:

"Home, home on the range,
Do the deer and the antelope play—
As my dear chased me for a change
Up the valley, a night and a day . . ."

"I got blue versions for most everything, not dirty but just a little suggestive. Hell, there is a bird in New York in a Fifty Second street bistro who makes a fortune with such lines, while I get peanuts. Well, sister, you will do. Those same numbers tonight. And give 'em the big smile, the come hither look, and the flesh flash, no matter how much you hate their guts. It's a living till something better comes along."

"Thanks, Charlie," she said. She could see he was really friendly with no more desire for her than a clam shell.

Bonnie went back to her room, to wait for dinner, and the first show. She was glad to have something new to do, to avoid the terrible horror and depression that had been hers ever since that awful night she had been awakened by that slap in the face. It was hard to believe she had been made a dirty trollop, been robbed of everything by a husband she had loved and adored.

That train trip out of town had been plain misery, as had the days and nights that passed, afterward. Though untrained in ways of the world, Bonnie did have intelligence. The trouble was she had been so sheltered that she was unprepared for the handsome guy who had risen from the underworld to bring her to disaster.

All the steps were clear enough—now that she gazed back. She had been to him a prize sap, ready for the plucking. Chances were he never had known her brother. Perhaps he had never even been in the service—anyone could buy a uniform. He knew her lack of familiarity with bonds and stocks, and legal papers. He did know about formalities, and perhaps had been a salesman of shady investments.

How simple she had been. Sign here, sign there—only transfers, my loved one. First the power of attorney, then these so-called transfers that stripped her completely—leaving, by calculation, just enough money to get her far, far out of town.

She had gone to a newsstand, kept buying home town sheets. The divorce had been granted, with the Judge in chambers, but the whole story had come out, the photo, the finding of her all but nude in bed, the actor with her. Jim Redwood had been fiendishly clever in getting the kind of witnesses no one could possibly buy. In running away she had, of course, driven the last nail in the coffin of her reputation. In her home town she was talked of as a common slut, and it was good riddance to bad rubbish.

You can't calculate hatred, put it on the scales and say how much it weighs, or how powerful it may be. Bonnie's hatred of Jim was terrific, and inside her brooded but one ambition—that was to strip him of all he possessed, and make a bum out of him as he had made out of her. The last paper she had seen announced his engagement to a Mrs. Brenda Matthews, a young widow, and she figured that was the girl she had seen in the roadhouse. No doubt they had been lovers, right along, waiting for the white lamb to be fleeced.

Now that her eyes were open to the foolishness of her flight—for she could have got a criminal lawyer to put up a battle—she saw everything clearly enough, but too late. Yet was it too late? In her subconscious mind remained a tiny seed of a hope: if she could only live to get revenge anything she might do to give her that satisfaction would be well worth while.

Meantime there was a girlie show that night. Lecherous eyes would look upon her, find her god, no doubt. To hell with that, and the customers, too. She would smile at them, sing to them, throw smiles and what lure she had at them, even give them a few furtive feels, to get those quarters for the fake drinks. But when the show was done, she would sleep alone. That would be one thing she could afford, for she wasn't greedy for small money. That wouldn't help her revenge. If any man had her it would be at a price well worth while, and darn well calculated beforehand. Whatever else Bonnie was going to be she was determined she would not go on the counter as an easily bought floosie.

At eight-thirty, though there were few customers, Charlie Dean wandered in to the piano. With lights, the tables set, and the place filled with waiters and people, the spot was more attractive. He played

a number, *The Memphis Blues*, using the slow chords and the sharp discords, on purpose, his head low over the keys, while smoke drifted from his first reefer of the evening.

Cameron had three old timers, which meant the gals had been there for over six months. He was looking for new ones, now, as the steady customers tired of the same faces. There wasn't much difference, really, so long as he had young, hard-boiled babes on the make. Their youth was a substitute for talent. Man was their prey; they were sex cash registers.

Bonnie watched each gal do a number: the flirting skirt, the hippy half walk, half dance, the husky voice; then, the number over, the prance down the platform steps to a waiting table. When she went on for an old Berlin number her voice was better, a pure alto, with a kind of feminine tenor. But the audience only saw her in the flesh, and there were some wolf whistles. She was sweet, appealing, with a youth that was out of place, a kind of remote distinction. But she had a smile that promised what it would never fulfill, and more important the long legs had witchery. She got some applause, and when she walked down the platform a thin, wiry type, with a small mustache, in a light suit, with a brilliantly painted tie, sprang from his seat and beckoned toward an empty chair.

"You are a new one. I'm Kent Kartner, an old sport, here."

"I'm—I'm Bonnie Laurie," she said, on the spur of the moment. She was thinking of Annie Laurie, subconsciously. "But I'm afraid you will only be wasting your time. I'm paid to give mine."

"Can't I buy you a drink without going into my motives?"

"Sure, and I'm going to take the first and last Scotch highball of my evening."

"Okay, Bonnie, and I'll want to be seeing more of you—all of you," he said, laughing at his old and oft-repeated line.

He ordered, and Bonnie lapsed into silence. She would give her company, let her hand be touched, accept a slight pressure of knee under the table. But she was darned, then or afterward, if she could or would go into the kidding and supposedly amusing routine that Sally and her kind did as an act to entertain the customers.

Kent Kartner never told his business, but he had plenty of money. He had also been a good customer next door, at the converted farmhouse, better known as the riding academy. The gimmick was this: couples could not check in, but any man could pay a stiff price for a single room. That gave him the right to wander about in the build-

ing, wherever he might pay for a welcome. In this manner Cameron figured he took no chances of being raided for running a disorderly house. The gals lived there, and the men were paid guests.

The next couple of nights Kartner made a big play for Bonnie. He tried to make daytime dates to take her shopping, and often he flashed a roll and said kiddingly that any part of it was hers. He was a good fellow, the sky was the limit.

She told him, wearily, she was not a hooker, at any price.

"Then couldn't you learn to like me?" he had asked, wistfully.

"Not you, not any other man," she exclaimed, slowly, and the contempt she put into the word *man* would have done credit to a dramatic actress. It sounded as if she had said *worm*.

Sally told her one night, after work, that she was a chump.

"That Kartner is a big gambler. He has gone for you hard. You could work him for plenty."

"It wouldn't be worth it. Any male animal really makes my flesh crawl."

"Is that so, dearie? Well, I don't mind a little crawling if it pays enough."

"I have no criticism. Make a sucker out of every man you can. Every man will make one out of you if given the chance."

Bonnie looked at her left hand, thought of the solitaire that had been stolen from her that awful night—and the wedding ring that had been left on her finger, ironically, which she had ended by pawning for ten bucks.

"The best man in the world isn't worth having, Sally. If I ever go through the sex motions again it will be for a mighty good reason—a reason that has a strong, determined motive behind it. I'll be aiming somewhere and at something. But I won't fool with Kartner nor any other of the customers. What you and the others do is your own affair. I'm not interested, and certainly not critical. A woman must use every weapon she has at her disposal, and sex is the strongest, but I'm selling Mike Cameron my time, what little ability I have, and I will stand a little pawing in the joint. That is as far as I'll go. I'm not going to be kissed or man-handled."

"All right, sister, all right. I understand. You got a terrible dirty deal, and you want to sleep alone. Never fear, you'll get over it. What once was poison becomes a bait. You'll be falling again."

Bonnie laughed with genuine pleasure, a fine and robust belly laugh. The very idea appealed to more sense of humor that she thought

she had retained. It was really funny, like a cartoon strip: Bonnie and an unidentified male, going through the motions of love and romance.

Rather than repress Kent Kartner, or cause his attentions to be transferred elsewhere, Bonnie's evident unwillingness to have anything personal to do with him, except allow him to spend money in the night spot, sit and look at her, put his hand on hers and squeeze it, or press his body to her own in a short dance, left him all the more eager and more anxious to fulfill his purpose. If she had figured it out, a ready acceptance couldn't have been more calculated to arouse him. He couldn't understand why and how a girl in a spot like this should turn him down unless she was holding out for a big price.

There was only one way, he figured, to end all this, and that was to play the strong and dominating male on the make, with strong arms, and a bank-roll.

Since Bonnie had come to Cameron's joint he hadn't registered at the rooming layout next door, hadn't played any of the other three girls. But suddenly he registered for two nights, in succession, and he found the location of Bonnie's room, on the second floor, at the back.

While Mrs. Cameron was away from the little office, for a few minutes, he slipped in and stole the master pass key. It would open the locks of all the doors in the place.

On this second night he waited until three o'clock in the morning. Then when things had quieted down, he slipped on his trousers and slippers. He slowly crept downstairs from the third floor, where he had been given a room, and down the dimly lighted hallway of the second floor. He paused outside No. 21, Bonnie's room.

He tapped softly at the door.

"Who is there?" came a sleepy voice. "Is there a fire?"

"Open up—just a minute."

"Well, a man's voice, in the middle of the night. Kartner's, it sounds to me. Go away, you louse, I won't open up to you nor anybody else."

Kartner chuckled. He inserted the key in the lock, pushing out the other key, which fell to the floor inside. Softly he opened the squeaky door, anyway, and entered. He saw, by the dim moonlight, coming through an open window, that Bonnie had leaped from her bed, wearing only a thin cotton nightgown.

He groped toward her with open arms.

"Honey, honey, you have me going. Take my entire roll, take all I've got, but I must have you."

"By heaven, I guess my body still belongs to me," said Bonnie, and she swung her clenched fist with all her might against his face.

He swore, but he came right in. Then his arms were about her and he was forcing her toward the bed. She got one hand free and scratched like a cat at his face. She tried to give him the knee but he turned and she missed. He was stronger than she was. She knew that it would do no good to cry for help. In such a place this was all good innocent fun. Suddenly, she went limp in his arms. He took that as a token of surrender.

What she was trying to do was reach a heavy bronze lamp on the dresser. Whether suspicious or not he wheeled back to the window. Bonnie threw her arms about him, took her right ankle, hooked it about his left ankle, jerked, and he tripped. As he fell to the floor, he struck his head against the window sill. His back to her, Kartner struggled to his knees, his hands holding on to the sill.

In a burst of strength that was almost like that of a maniac, Bonnie lifted him, by holding his ears, banging and banging his head against the sill. As he tried to get to his feet, quite groggy, she pushed his head through the window, and with a frantic use of muscles she didn't know she possessed, she propelled his body half out. Then she lifted the legs, gave a shove, and he slipped out so easily it seemed like a conjuring trick. She heard a cry—then a dull thud—and moans that ended in silence. That was a good eighteen foot fall, on to a paved back yard.

Bonnie dressed and went to Cameron's apartment. She knocked hard on the door. The boss opened up, his hair disordered.

"What's all this, my girl?" he said.

"Kent Kartner, he tried to rape me, and I threw him out of the window."

"Are you drunk? No, I see you're not. How on earth could you get the leverage to do that? You don't look like one of them ex-female wrestlers."

Bonnie began to laugh, half in hysteria.

"I don't know. It just happened. I heard him moaning down there, and then silence."

"Wait until I throw something on. I'll arouse the porter."

In a minute Cameron came out wearing an old green bathrobe with Mike Cameron in heavy black across the back, that dated back to the days when he had been a bum pug. He awakened a bleary eyed porter, who found a flashlight. The three of them went out by the

front door and the porter led the way to the back of the building. A prone form could be seen, lying unconscious.

Mike Cameron whistled.

"Here, Billiken, you take him by the arms, I'll carry the legs. We can't have any scandal around here. We'll carry the body out to the highway and down the road a hundred paces, and then to the grass on this side. Bonnie you wait in the doorway. If any stray drunk comes say we have had enough drunks for one night."

In a few minutes the two men returned. The porter trotted to bed. Bonnie went along with Cameron into the little cubby hole office.

He grinned at her, picked up the telephone and asked for a number he knew very well.

"Hello, Sheriff's office? Who is this? Jack Connors? Hello, Jack. Got something for you. Got a report there is a man lying rather badly hurt up on the highway about a block from my joint. I went up to take a look. I recognized him as a bird named Kent Kartner, a good customer with plenty of jack. His car is still in our parking lot. It isn't a robbery case. I have his wallet filled with bills. I'll turn it over to the Sheriff's office, if you'll send a man. You will come yourself—and phone immediately for an ambulance? Okay, I guess it is a hit and run case. What that bird was doing out there on the highway I dunno. Mebbe he got hot from too much hootch and wandered out for a breath of air. So long, Jack, be seeing you. I'll go down to the joint and break out a bottle of your favorite brand."

He hung up and grinned at Bonnie.

"How am I doing?"

"Fine. But will there be any comeback?"

"No, so long as he wasn't rolled. You see I keep in with the Sheriff's office. I'll turn over the roll intact. Whatever is returned is none of my business. As to Kartner, I'll call The Mercy Hospital in the morning to find just how badly he was hurt. He has no kick coming. You could have taken a gat and shot him dead. No guy has any right to any rape. Now run to bed, Bonnie, and think nothing more about it. A hit and run case. Gee, that's a good one. He didn't make a hit and he didn't get any run for his money. Instead he got a jump. A jump out of the window. I think I'll bill you as The Blonde Bombshell!"

He patted Bonnie on the back. She turned to him and said, "You're a good fellow, Mike," and went to bed again—feeling a bit proud of herself. After all, she had proved that she knew how to handle herself

in the clinches. Bonnie Laurie, The Blonde Bombshell. It sounded tough and hard. And that was the way she wanted to be.

CHAPTER FIVE

MIKE CAMERON, being beyond city limits and with nothing to fear from the County seat, nevertheless drew most of his customers from the town. Therefore, he was not above a little lurid publicity. He called the hospital in the morning. Kent Kartner had a slight concussion but not dangerous. His left arm had been broken. He would be hospitalized for some time.

Indirectly, word reached the columnist of the afternoon sheet in the city, The Challenger, and the afternoon gossip was written up as follows:

"A new patient was admitted at The Mercy Hospital in the early hours, Kent Kartner, well known man about town, who is resting comfortably. Mr. Kartner has a broken left arm and a slight concussion of what he affectionately calls his brain. The Sheriff's Office reports he was not robbed. His pocketbook is being held by police till his recovery. There is an undisclosed amount of money still in it, strange to tell. The patient is supposed to be a hit and run accident.

The body was found some paces from Mike Cameron's night spot (name not mentioned, this isn't an ad, maybe a warning) out at the end of Route 3, just beyond the limits of our town of respectability. There is a strange story connected with the accident. One night, in the rooming house next door to the joint (sorry, night club) a gent walked in by mistake. Perhaps he was walking in his sleep. His route took him into the bed chamber of one of the entertainers. Anyway, this gent is alleged to have walked into the room occupied by Bonnie Laurie, who has since been nicknamed The Blonde Bombshell, for what had happened in the twinkling of an eye was worthy of Gorgeous George, the wrestler.

The intruder was biffed and tripped. Before he knew anything about it or could leave a forwarding address, he had started head first out of the window. The rest of his body went along. A second floor fall can be very shattering.

Bedtime Blonde

But, sir, we are not intimating that anything like this happened to Kent Kartner, who is a gent in every manner of the word."

Mike showed the item in "The Man Who Gets Around" column to Bonnie.

"That will be the end of Kartner as a heavy sport and ladies' man in this burg, sister, and furthermore it will make the guys with ideas lay off you."

"How—how—"

"I tipped off a reporter who knows this columnist. I bet we do more business than usual tonight. You have a rep, now, of a wild woman. They'll want to see you. Kartner was a bootlegger before prohibition. He's a gambler now and is supposed to be a hard case. That story is put sneaky. The sporting readers will get the connection that he was the bird who went through the window."

Well, thought Bonnie, there is one advantage when one has been made cheap and degraded in your own sight and that of the world. This had all been done to her by Jim Redwood. Nothing else mattered. She took a kind of perverted humor in the thought of Kent Kartner reading that column. Perhaps, in the future, he would pick girls delighted to be bought. He wouldn't think he was so very smart.

A new carnival moved to a fair lot south of the city that morning. The first edition of the newspaper was read by Slim Travers, owner of the girlie show. The banner read "Strip Tease of Strip Teases." But he had just lost his chief strip artist, who had skipped to a talent agent from a mid-west burlesque wheel.

Travers had a line of six gals, who stripped, all right, but the kind of show was more than a display of naked epidermis. There had to be some slow allure, provocativeness, and beauty, if you could get it. Aside from several headliners, he usually got some tarnished females lacking that take-'em off spark with that hot sex-appeal.

He read over that phrase—Blonde Bombshell—and it sounded like something. Probably a peroxide blonde with short lines. Strip needed height and an average face and bosom. Still, he had been a follower of hunches when he was one of the best talent agents (flesh peddlers) in Hollywood, before that smash-up with his wife. She had most of his small fortune already in her name and got most of the rest in a Community Property settlement. He had gone on an endless drinking spree, and put his last few grand into this carnival game. So why not follow this last hunch and take a gander at the beauty who tossed a would be raper out of the window?

Bedtime Blonde

At nine-thirty, Travers left the show with an assistant, a dumb bird he couldn't trust with the night's receipts.

Cameron's joint was a replica to him of all the smoke filled spots where folks came to have what was called a good time. He got a table down front and consumed several double rye highballs while he waited for Bonnie to come on. He was tapering off, down to a quart a day, now, and no longer had the morning shivers nor the night sweats.

Even in sport dress Travers was distinctive looking, with a gaunt face, piercing eyes, a poker expression and a slight gray at the temples. His lips had had a bitter cast to them as if he had just tasted something he did not relish.

He gave little attention until Bonnie appeared in a blue cotton dress, cut low at the bosom and legs that twinkled as she strode in an easy stride. Mentally he undressed her, coldly, methodically and with about as much emotion as an adding machine. She had that certain something, added to the physical requirements he sought—that odd, unspoiled look, not of innocence exactly, but of freshness of youth, fragrance and cleanness, that old Florenz Ziegfeld aimed for and attained when he picked gals for *The Follies*.

Her voice was so-so but her movements were natural, and the smile came easy. The blue eyes seemed a bit chilly. When she stepped down from the platform he approached her, bowed a little from the waist.

"I'm a talent scout, Travers by name—Slim Travers. You've probably never heard of me. I want to talk business with you."

She gazed at him suspiciously.

"Business," he repeated, "but not monkey business. I'd go to sleep from boredom with a naked chorus about me. I'm woman cured, if you know what I mean. Women are a bad noise to me."

"That goes mutual with men," said Bonnie, dryly. "But I only have fifteen minutes. Hard to talk in this din."

"Oh, I can do it."

He ordered a double for himself and she waved the waiter aside.

"Bonnie, I won't ask you. I'll tell you. You're getting about thirty a week, mebbe forty with drink graft. Do you sleep alone?"

"Yes, and like it, and will continue till I'm shown more than I have ever seen around this dump. What is your proposition?"

"As a starter—a hundred and fifty a week."

"And the catch?"

"You have to do a strip tease with my girlie act in the carnival show.

Bedtime Blonde

With the G string and the little fluff around the bubbies, it isn't much more than the new French bathing suits. It is the taking 'em off that gives the suckers the thrill, seeing a beautifully gowned gal slowly and seductively disrobe, as if at the finish she would be handed to the Gillie on a silken divan. He gets the last flash of pink and palpitating epidermis. And then you are off. No finger will touch you."

"I see, Slim Travers, and why me of all Janes?"

"Oh, you have that something."

"I see, but if an expert—"

"Why be the boss of a cheap girlie carney show? That is a long story."

"Okay, but if I go along, where do I live?"

"I have a trailer. I'll even give you my .38 police positive revolver. You can put me out of my misery if I ever touch you. Women give me the creeps."

"When would I join?"

"In a coupla days. In the meantime, you must come out in the morning and my nance producer, Eddie Coverton, will train you a bit. It isn't quite as easy as it looks. It isn't just getting undressed. There is a certain way that it must be done. Eddie uses a chair for the gal to sit down, cross her legs, kick off her slippers and then take off her stockings. It's all slow and measured. Altogether it is a matter of minutes. The more modest you feel, the better the show."

"Well, there seems no limit to what I have to put up with. Last night—"

"I know. And now you are the Blonde Bombshell. I'll advertise you as such. Don't think of yourself as a victim. Think of men as suckers to be rooked. The world as a place that is due to give you what you want. You have been hurt, the hell with it! That is what I'm slowly learning. Kid, two years ago I was one of the best flesh peddlers in Hollywood. I made Mabel Lambert what she is today. At the end she switched agents. I don't blame her. I was drunk for a year. I was the guy who planted Lona Burner behind a soda water fountain and then had Bill Berler, the producer, come in the drug store and think that he was making a 'discovery'. Why, she had been an extra girl for four years. He thought he had discovered her when she smiled and asked him what he wanted? I was good." He doubled a right fist and regarded his nails. "Maybe I could be good again."

"I heard you order that double rye."

"Yes, first, it was wife trouble, then booze. But I'm tapering off.

What do you say? Will you take a chance? It might be, Bonnie, that we could rise from a honkey-tonk level and get some place together? I don't know. You might fall for some handsome empty-headed male again. I couldn't do anything with a girl who has any illusions left, for she wouldn't obey orders."

"That all sounds good. I still ask you just why the idea of a two-some, if as you say you are off wenches?"

"I'm a man who once could make 'em something in the big money. It was never at the usual ten percent, of the gravy, talent agent fee. Mine was a partnership arrangement. As a personal manager, I got fifty percent and I earned it. Floating a star in Hollywood has all sorts of angles. A fight manager gets fifty percent because he knows how to fix things. I, too, with the right femme know how to set the stage. Get her to meet the right people. She may have to sleep with a man or two—but only once. Then I take over for her rise."

"I see, sleep once . . ."

Bonnie bit the words as if they hurt her curved lips.

"Hell, a man would starve to death in Hollywood pimping for a virgin. I start with the big people and then the contracts are signed. But I sound as if I were painting a beautiful picture of success, and maybe both of us will end as we are now—a washed out talent agent, and a punk gal losing her voice in a cheap joint and consorting with second class men."

"That is all true," said Bonnie, "but you are bitter and intelligent. You may stage a comeback. You look at me as if I reminded you of something you wished to forget. I like that attitude in a man. I think I'll take you up. But you'll have to tell Mike Cameron. I have no contract. I'll run out to the carney in the morning, look over the lay-out, see that trailer of yours and get that revolver you speak of to put under the pillow. You may be woman cured, but there may be some hick about who will get wrong ideas. One who might get all heated up after seeing me in the raw with only a bit of fluff and a G-string to protect me."

Travers laughed. "Maybe you will do, Bonnie, if you really are as tough as you sound."

She smiled at him. "You don't know the half of it, mister."

CHAPTER SIX

THERE is nothing more dismal than a carnival on the lot in the morning sun, without the crowd and the noise and the whoopla. Bonnie noted the rides and the stands, little clouds of dust rising and settling over everything, the few men and women lounging near where some trailers were parked.

She walked to a stand, with banners above, showing girls in various approaches to nudity. The platform was empty. So was the ticket cage. She climbed by little stairs at one side, pushed aside the flap of the tent and entered. There were rows of seats. At the back, a stage, with curtains parted. A man sat with his back to her, reading *Variety*. He wore only a pair of silk pants, a silk shirt, and open toe shoes with polished nails.

Bonnie coughed in order to get a little attention. He turned without getting up. His face was pale. Washed out brown hair was brushed straight back without a part. His lips were pink and a touch of rouge was at either cheek bone.

"Hello, sister, looking for one of the gals?"

"No, Eddie Covertton."

"Oh, I'm Eddie. Slim calls me Eddie. But my close friends calls me Sallie. Are you the new broad he has hired? The Blonde Bombshell, so to speak?"

His voice was soft with a slight lisp. He caressed every syllable. Then he rose, put his hands upon his hips, and gave her a long once over. He ended up by smiling, showing a fine set of store teeth.

"Slim sure can pick them. I bet you will be a sight for sore eyes stripped. Are you ready to take a lesson?"

He beckoned prettily to the side stairs. She joined him on the stage. She had never taken her clothes off for any man aside from her husband. Eddie, or Sallie, as she learned to call him, was very much more like a girl. Very much more like one, indeed!

"There is more to this, darling, than just removing your clothes. It has to be done with a certain artistic skill and suspense. Want me to show you?"

"Why, of course," said Bonnie, a bit puzzled.

Bedtime Blonde

"Wait a brief five minutes, darling, and I shall be back."

She waited. Then she saw—yes—it was Sallie, all right, but he was dressed in a gorgeous costume; and a wig.

"I always wanted to do this for an audience," he simpered, "but the police won't stand for it. Now, my child, I shall show you the various stages of the strip tease. First you must see every garment, even the little pink panties. I passed them up as a matter of fact. Each has a zipper. Now watch me make my entrance. And study just how I go about stripping."

Well, this was business and he was a stage manager, of sorts. This was something that she must be taught. She saw how he started throwing off the furs, then the slippers, the stockings, the waist, and the skirts and was down to the lingerie. Meantime he was never standing still but turning and posing in a very feminine way.

"I'll beat an accompaniment with the drums," he said, "and now do you think you have the drift of it?"

"Perhaps," she said.

"Then go into the dressing room, off at the right. Strip off the clothes you are wearing. You will find a new G string in a little box on the dressing table and the gimmicks for the breasts, little bird nests I call them. This is my own private outfit. I sometimes use it at a drag. It is very like the one you will find in the dressing room. Start with the G string and dress and come out and we will go through the routine."

Bonnie did as she was told. To her surprise she found the G string comfortable and easy to put on, as well as what Sallie called the bird nests. She was amazed to find that the lingerie and the gowns were of very fine and expensive silks and satin and the stockings of sheer nylon. The slippers were a bit big, so she stuffed paper in the toes. Then she came out upon the stage. Sallie pulled down the curtain and sat down at an intricate set of drums.

She did not feel at all embarrassed with him. The thought of making a vulgar exhibition of herself, before a gaping, leering and sex-heated male audience, made her a little sick at the stomach.

She snapped her finger in annoyance, as she missed a zipper. Having studied the routine carefully she made few mistakes. Then she was standing very nude before running toward the dressing room. She heard little shrieks of approval from Sallie, "Oh, honey, you'll do. You'll have 'em rolling in the aisles."

Now Bonnie removed the badge of the strip tease profession, the G string, put it back in the box and dressed in her own clothes.

"I understand I start tonight," she said. "It's going to be horrid undressing out in front of all those low kind of men."

"Oh, they're horrid all right. Call me Sallie from now on. There's a trick to all this, kid. Just forget anything about a sense of shame. Remember all that we women have to put up with in so many ways—not to speak of child bearing. Take another view of it. Think when you are through *you have cheated that crowd*. Why, my dear? Because the men are all hept up. You are beautiful. But where is the substitute open to their lust? Why, a lot of drabs and sluts. Even if they close their eyes, they will still feel cheated, for you have escaped them.

"That is the way. Think that you are making fools of them, cheating 'em by working 'em up. What after all do you give their eyes? A glimpse for an instant of your white form, and then, bingo, you are out of sight. They're still sitting there like a lot of fish gasping out of water. You've made suckers out of them. They go out beaten, baffled, dazed and empty handed after a single glimpse of loveliness. For you are lovely, darling, much too good for this kind of pitch. But I only hope Slim has other plans for you. I want to get him back to Hollywood—in the chips again, where he belongs. What I've stood for from that man. Now I have to shift to another trailer. Seems you will be the queen bee in the other berth. Well, all in a good cause, I say. That slob of a wife as near ruined him as ruin can get. But I'm talking just too, too much. Be back at eight o'clock, sweet pants, and ready to show 'em a good time. Cheat 'em, cheat 'em, cheat 'em!"

He fairly yelled this last, and she waved to him as she went out. She really liked Sallie. Why show discrimination? He couldn't help being what he was. He had a heart and feelings. No doubt, he could prove a good friend with no ambitions whatsoever.

Over at one end of the lot were the trailers she had first sighted. She walked toward them and asked which trailer belonged to Slim Travers? A rough workman jerked a finger toward a long, black job, but didn't know if the bird was up yet.

Bonnie walked to the back of the trailer. The door was ajar. She partly opened it, glanced inside. On a couch lay Slim Travers, one foot dangling over the side. On the floor was a pitcher and a glass. Lying on one side was an empty whiskey bottle. He was asleep, breathing heavily, and he was blind drunk.

She made a little face. Then she felt ashamed. Sallie and this man—the two had been friendly. It was obvious that they wanted no part of

her, physically speaking. Who was she to be shocked? Not so long ago she was lonely, sick at heart and without a friend.

So Bonnie walked into the trailer, closed the door, opened a window and went to the front of the trailer where there was a little kitchen. She found running water from a tank, started to boil some for coffee. There were several dirty dishes which she washed. In the ice box was a cantaloupe. She cut it in half and extracted the seeds. Soon the coffee was ready. She put the salted melon on a clean plate. Then she started to boil some eggs.

"Hey, Slim Travers," she yelled, "I heard this once in a western picture, 'come and get it or I shall throw it away.' Your breakfast is ready, sir."

Slim walked shame-faced toward the little kitchen and dining room, combing his hair with his fingers.

"That's a good gal," he said, approvingly. "What this trailer needs is a woman's refining influences and fewer empty whiskey bottles."

When she crinkled her nose delicately, he raised a restraining hand, then gulped with gusto the cup of coffee she poured for him.

"I meant that refining influence part, kid, for I know you are refined. Your present state is the result of tough treatment. I'm a judge of human nature. My friend wife was refined, too, when I got her. But she went Hollywood on me. I was too busy to know that she was meeting a British actor, all ham, pure Yorkshire breed, at Prince Mike's at well as in an apartment. I wasn't smart. I bought her jewels and clothes and neglected her. Guess I deserved what I got. Now that I'm becoming reasonably sober most of the time—last night was an off period—I think I'm well rid of the hussy. He will get fat off her and dish her for some London import who speaks with one of those frightful accents."

Then he changed the subject, "Guess our boy friend took charge of you and showed you the strip ropes. Think nothing of showing your fair form. Just think you are giving a flash of beauty for excellent pay. I have a new item 'bout you in the evening rag today. I'm going to get that Blonde Bombshell stuff on a banner."

"I won't let little things hurt me. A big one hurt me too much."

"You can tell me some time. Now let me show you your compartment, and mine."

He showed her how the divan slipped over to make a bed. Then, he felt under the pillow.

"And here is your gat, I'm not fooling. If I come in or any other

man, give him the works. Unless you sell it yourself, your body is your own. An exquisite gift that should not be handled lightly. Now go get your suit case and come back here and rest. This is your traveling home. You'll find the show people pleasant after you get to know them—drifters, some of them, making scores with gimmicks but right folks under the skin."

"I like Sallie," she said, quickly.

"Salt of the earth, been with me for years. You'll forget he is a nance. Fine brain, too. Need any money to shop with?"

"No, but—"

"Then do some shopping for me in town. The larder is low and the ice box almost empty. I'll teach you what I know about cooking and then you can cook yourself. And unless it is business, you can forget I am around—as a man—for I'm a voluntary exile from sex."

He grinned. "That last wasn't bad. I must be getting my wit back or maybe I borrowed that from Bill Mizner before he died. Hi, ho, the good ones die, but you can't kill a harlot or a heel. They go on forever."

"I know one heel I'd like to stop," murmured Bonnie, very quietly.

Travers nodded, "I like the still and tranquil venom in your voice. It has quality."

As she sat there, across the tiny table, Travers wondered—wondered if he could make something, something big out of her? Oh, he had encountered some terrific let-downs. There was the dipso—the nymphomaniac—all discoveries—all discards. Now he would have to study Bonnie Laurie, and find if she was vulnerable, with weaknesses that would make her impossible to handle.

To Travers, as a talent agent, his was the directing brain. He had to plot the moves—the campaign—as he called it. There was little Claire Ventor, who finally broke from him and went under. But not before her career had paid off plenty. Claire had succeeded because she was forced, at his dictation, to put up with men whose only attractiveness was the power they wielded.

When Slim Travers said, "Impossible to handle," and swept his hands sideways, or, "Won't take directing," he meant it off the studio lot. When he had them signed up right, the director could take over. He meant submission in private life, not that he gloated in being obeyed. But because his brain (acute and keen save for that mistake with the wife) could see from the side-lines what was not clear to those in the game.

If this kid starts selling herself or falls in love with some sheep-

faced youth, I'm off her, he reflected. I'll watch and wait. And if I'm to gain respect for *my* judgment I'll have to stop hitting the bottle so hard and so often.

Bonnie smiled, rather conscious that she was being studied by a master. Physically, aside from business, he wouldn't give a lead nickel for her. That, alone, was amusing and interesting. He was rather distinguished looking with grey at the temples.

While he drank a second cup of coffee she searched the closet and the ice box and started to make a list for shopping.

"Get a big steak," he suggested, "and we will have Eddie to cook it. That kid is a chef. And stop worrying. For a beautiful gal, a wrinkle is something no man is worth."

"Don't get me started on what I think a man is worth, Mr. Travers. I guessed so wrong that I never want to make another estimate."

He agreed with her, and then excused himself to shave in the little bath room. This was new to Slim Travers. To care how he looked in that trailer of his was really something.

Bonnie did the shopping. Eddie came in and cooked. They all shared a remarkable dinner but the girl's mind was absent. Before her was that strip tease she loathed. Yet she was going through with it.

It would have been difficult to explain to anyone. She felt that she was being punished and, indeed, should continue to be punished for having allowed Jim Redwood to utterly ruin what life she possessed. To pay him back she would do anything—but until that chance came along she would not pause at anything contemptible, except sleep with strange men and feel soiled and filthy. She didn't believe punishment for being a feminine imbecile went that far. . . .

Sallie, as she continued to call him, walked over to the girlie show with her. He explained that she would come on after the other four gals. Two did strips and the bumps, one a Hula, the fourth a kind of bastard dance of the seven veils which left her (so rumor said) without even a G string.

"They are just four confirmed tramps," exclaimed Sallie, spitting out the last word, "who might have made good waitresses in cheap jernts. They gave a lot away before some bright fellow taught 'em it could be worth a bit if peddled right. Now all four have macks who work the crowds, lining up suckers, with whispered propositions. The main guy doesn't allow their two big trailers on the carnival lot. So the vans are parked a block outside and back from the highway. Don't be too disgusted, Bonnie. I know Slim Travers. He is giving you that

long one-two that might mean you will be valuable. If so you will be going places with him."

"He is a woman hater, isn't he?"

"He only loved his wife. The deal she gave him soured him. But I always found him very interested in women, their capabilities, their possibilities. A man who hated women couldn't develop them. But, on the flesh plane, he is really indifferent. He made himself that way because he knew that an agent who collects in bed never collects anywhere else and then he became naturally cold. He doesn't know it, but I don't blame his wife. Slim is a great guy but with the sex warmth of an iceberg."

"Thanks, Sallie, for everything. Don't be too fast with the drums on my first strip tease."

As they approached the girlie frame-up a ballyhoo man was on the platform giving his spiel. Behind him stood four girls, heavily made-up, in thin kimonos. After his talk, they would open the kimonos for an instant flash of bare breasts, and then trip inside.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, you haven't seen anything yet. Not a peek do you get of the Blonde Bombshell until you get inside. She turned the head of a prince of the royal blood and that head has been twisted ever since to get another gander. She is lovely. She is wonderful. And brother, she has these them and those. On the platform you note four of her companions, pretty and sweet. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Follow 'em inside. Come on in and get your tickets. The show starts in a few minutes."

Bonnie thought it was odd—this dressing to undress. She waited for her cue. Then she stepped on the stage and found herself in darkness, but being picked out as she moved by a bright spotlight.

"This is my first night here, gentlemen," she hardly heard herself saying, "and I know that I must act as if I were quite alone. I'll sit down here and kick off my slippers. Then I'll cross my legs and slip off my stockings. I must act as if I didn't know that naughty eyes were undressing me quicker than I can undress myself. I must feel a modest girl in her own home, taking her things off before going to bed. And then at the very last moment—she will be aware that there is a Peeping Tom gazing in at her. Startled and abashed and all pink with blushing, she will run out of the room."

As she spoke, quite slowly, Bonnie went through this pantomime. It was just that the dead silence with all those staring eyes had made

her want to scream. Instead, to quiet her own nerves, she began to talk—to become the first talking strip tease with a carnival.

Her voice was gentle and cultured and her manner refined. As she stripped to the raw, she gave a thrill to the male spectators who had been unstirred by the burlesque antics of the four strippers who had come before Bonnie. Her exit was greeted with thunderous applause.

She merely pushed her head through the back curtains, holding them tightly, so that only her bare right knee also showed through, and said, "Thanks, gentlemen and I hope you will be seeing more of me again."

There was a great laugh at that—and then Sallie was throwing his arms about her, and Slim Travers was patting her on the back.

"Great looks, an ability to talk and ad lib, too. Why, Bonnie, if I haven't found a treasure, I'll go out and shoot myself."

"You have found a treasure," said Sallie, "believe one girl who knows how to size up another. Bonnie will be a gold mine. Those gillies will be back for another show to get another load of her."

"I simply had to talk," explained Bonnie, "that silence was killing me."

She did three more shows that night, being let off lightly, as the usual "grind" (as carney people so aptly call the work) called for at least ten shows before midnight.

At ten-thirty she was through, Sallie told her. She went back to her original clothes and left the girlie show by the back way. Circling about to the midway, everything was in full blare and bloom with the din and dust and blaring music making for the daze and confusion that means the carnival.

Bonnie stepped across in the direction of the trailers and reaching the Travers' trailer, she hadn't noticed that a tall young man, his grey snap brim pulled down low over his eyes, was furtively following her.

She walked inside the trailer, pulled the door shut, turned on the electric light, and went into the second compartment, drew down the bed and started to undress, without self-consciousness. The strain had tired her out more than she realized, and even if she had been a success at this disreputable kind of sex appeal, the thought of night after night of this telescoping into the future wasn't what one would call beguiling.

Undressed, down to her silk panties, Bonnie figured it was too warm for a nightgown, so she retired as she was, pulling a sheet over her up to the waist. From the carnival came those mingled blaring sounds

and then, strangely, she was about to go to sleep when she heard a very tiny noise at the rear of the trailer.

This startled her, for if Slim Travers had entered, he would have not been cautious or timid in entering his own trailer. Suddenly she realized the door wasn't locked. It should have a lock. Travers and she possessed separate keys. But there were a number of other trailers about. Maybe they had snap locks from inside? But, now, that little noise continued. Then she heard one footstep—then another—and someone was using a pencil flashlight.

A robber? Bonnie wondered. And then she thought how kind in his peculiar way, Slim Travers had been to her. She sat up in bed and spoke sharply, "Mr. Travers isn't in. Go away or I'll scream for help."

"As I live and breathe and still have my eyes, I recognize that voice—it is the strip tease queen."

Footsteps came closer, the curtain was swung aside. She could not see the man as he held the pencil flash so the light went into her eyes and then traveled over her. Involuntarily she pulled up the sheet.

"The Blonde Bombshell. Well, this is luck. I came here only looking for the money box belonging to the boss. But now I'll get you, first."

Bonnie's right hand went behind her, reached under the pillow. She felt wild with rage. She forgot any fear that she might naturally have had for the insult thrown so carelessly made her see herself as this thug must see her.

"You get out of here fast or they'll take you away on a stretcher."

"Why, I'll turn you over, first off, and spank that pink fanny of yours. I'll—"

He moved toward the bed and Bonnie pulled out the revolver and pointing it at him, but without aiming, she pulled the trigger, once and then again.

The pencil flashlight fell to the floor of the trailer but it did not go out. The intruder crumpled up, groaning, and sitting down in such a way that he blocked the entrance.

Bonnie turned the switch, flooding the trailer with light. A red splash of blood was at the robber's left shoulder. Another crimson spot was on his forehead.

She put on her slippers and skirt and waist and stepped over the man's knees. And then she ran as quickly as she could toward the main entrance of the carnival. She saw officials there, wearing hats with cards in them, and two state troopers. She went up to one of them.

"Trooper, I'm Bonnie Laurie, one of the girls in the girlie show. I'm sleeping in Slim Traver's trailer. He is the boss. This is my first night so I did only three shows. A man entered looking for the bank-roll of the boss. He said he would take me, too. So I pulled out a revolver that Mr. Travers had given me to defend myself with—and—and—I shot him twice."

"What's that last, lady?"

"I shot him twice—left him all doubled up in the trailer."

"Bill—hear that—let's get going."

But Bonnie was out of breath by now and they waited until she could identify the trailer. The leading trooper carried a big flashlight. He was surprised—not that she had fired twice—but to find the man unconscious on the floor with two dangerous wounds. But when he cast the light into the robber's face he whistled and turned to Bonnie, in a kind of mixed awe and envy.

"Do you know what you have done, young lady?"

"No," said Bonnie, "but I hope nothing wrong. He is a robber, I hope."

"Say, you've downed Pistol Quertman, wanted in five states, for a combined reward of five grand to any citizen who gives information or does anything leading to his arrest. You've done it, lady, you have landed him in the hospital. Bill, hurry and telephone for an ambulance."

Slim Travers had been told about the movements of the troopers, with Bonnie toward his trailer; anything to do with the law travels quick on the carnival grapevine.

Now he pushed his way in. In rapid questioning, he got the story from the trooper. He then ran toward a telephone to tip off The Associated Press, as well as the local newspapers. He wanted this yarn to travel right along the route the carnival would take. He could imagine, at any rate, how it would be treated by that local columnist, with a little suggestion for his heading to the story:

BLONDE BOMBSHELL STRIKES AGAIN

To think of Bonnie hitting a five grand jackpot her first night on the carney lot!

Back at the trailer after they moved Pistol Quertman, Bonnie insisted upon pushing the curious beyond the curtains of her little compartment.

Bedtime Blonde

The jangling ambulance came, and the bandit was carried away to the hospital.

"Are you decent, Miss?" came the trooper's voice.

"One minute," she replied as she slipped into her panties, and then pulled on the shirt, adjusted the waist and gave an upward push to her hair.

"Come in," she invited, and went over the story again.

Through the interview and the pictures, Bonnie wondered where Slim Travers had gone for she thought of him as one to be on hand when publicity was to be handed out.

The fact was that he trusted her to take care of that end. He had taken a taxi downtown and having posted the A.P. man and the newspapers, he had gone to the Western Union office. There he sent a quick wire to a picture magazine, to come on and get the carnival and Bonnie, for a series of dramatic shots. He gave a recital of what had taken place.

His second wire was to the Johnston office, registering the title of a motion picture: *Blonde Bombshell*.

His third wire was to Morris Koenig, a well known independent movie producer in Hollywood. This was a night letter:

"Dear Morris: You remember me and you know that I never go off half cocked. Read the papers how Pistol Quertman, famed in your parts for robbing show people, was shot down and captured by my head strip tease artist stop her name is the blonde bombshell and that name is registered as a title with the Johnston office stop her story includes throwing a gambler out of the window while defending herself from his approaches stop she is hot stuff and her life account is for sale swell for syndication for the tabloid chain and here is my pitch why not come on and buy her exclusive yarn. Bring on a few gals and make a quickie right here with the carnival. Altogether it won't cost you your right eye. Anyway send along one of your brothers. They all look alike to me. You will see everything is ripe for a deal. I own the girlie show and I have the strip tease artist contracted for everything I can think up and you know me, Morris.

Slim Travers."

Leaving the Western Union office, Travers went to the leading hotel and by chance managed to find a stenog who had been kept late by several executives with a lot of mail to dictate.

Bedtime Blonde

He excused himself, said that he had a little contract to dictate, and wished a carbon.

The stenog obliged, and he began to dictate in a flat voice a fifty-fifty contract between himself and Bonnie Laurie, known as The Blonde Bombshell. Bonnie Laurie was to share fifty-fifty with Slim Travers, her manager and partner, on all monies she received from writing or having writing ghosted, for books, magazines, or newspapers, and monies received from acting on the stage, screen, or television, or being part of a radio program as participant or a guest, or monies from any movie or stage script dealing with her life in night club or carnival, or in possible stage or movie production. Not entered in this contract is the salary Bonnie Laurie receives with the carnival—save as that may be needed to by any additional work that she may do under Slim Travers' management or direction. In return Slim Travers will do all possible to advance the career of Bonnie Laurie, and as her manager will collect all monies and give fifty per cent of same. This contract will run five years, with an option to Mr. Travers of another five years renewal.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SLIM TRAVERS woke up Bonnie at one in the morning and with him were Sallie and a young ticket taker for the girlie show whom he wanted as witnesses.

She sat up in bed, brushed the sleep out of her eyes.

"Don't go at that guy, again," pleaded Travers, "we are here peaceful. This has nothing to do with your carney act, Bonnie, and before I forget it you are raised to one ninety per week. This has to do with the future. If I don't get you anything I don't get anything. If I make a lot of money for you, I get fifty per cent. That sounds fair, doesn't it?"

"Why, yes, unless you want to horn in on the reward?"

"Money like that—they'd arrest an agent for getting his bit. No Bonnie, buy anything else—I have plans—big plans."

He read the contract aloud.

"Gee," said Bonnie, "that makes me sound important. Well, if you get half of nothing, you won't get much. Pass me that fountain pen.

"I'm gambling on futures and I had no future. If you can get one for me fifty per cent is yours."

Bonnie signed, Sallie and the ticket taker put down their John Hancocks as witnesses, Travers scrawled his name twice and then each had a copy of the contract.

Sallie was trying to bring out a dimple in his right cheek as he watched Slim Travers.

"Something is going to break, Bonnie. Slim looks alive, and keen, as before he took that first big skid toward Skid Row. Now he is turning and heading for the heights of Beverley Hills again. What is it, boss?"

"Good night, Bonnie, sleep tight, and hang on to that revolver. Come along, boys. I want to wake up the main guy of the carnival. I'm going to get him to split fifty-fifty if anyone wants to make a movie on the lot. After all he can't use my girlie show and Bonnie, both pivot points, so I guess he will be reasonable.

Left alone, Bonnie turned off the electric switch, and for the second time that night tried to go to sleep. But the excitement, with the shooting, and now that contract—all the terms of which she did not understand, though it mentioned monies. It showed that Slim Travers must have a career in view for her, aside from making a flesh show of herself with the carney, doing this strip tease she utterly despised.

In fact she could see in Sallie's eyes that there might be something very immediate. If so this waking her up to sign a contract, it certainly showed that he did not trust her. He did not trust a woman any more than she would trust a man! That was a strange and a new thought to her—men, alone, weren't heels and unmentionable beasts. There were women just as bad. And Slim Travers thought, certainly, that she might be among these last. Well, he too, had been given a tough deal, no doubt, and had a right to be suspicious.

Why should she want his trust, anyway, since all he was interested in was exploiting her, if he could, for money? That was one way to put it, but there was little money for anyone without talent: Gypsy Rose Lee and Sally Rand were more than just strip artists. They must be artists or they wouldn't have won fame and fortune. Bonnie, she knew, would never go further in this work than this second class carney because you cannot do well anything that you loathe.

Perhaps, she thought, as she lapsed off to slumber, she might have something before her that might deserve to be called a future? At any rate, this excitement had done one fine thing. It had stopped her from

remembering—as had been her custom—that terrible horror of waking up in the night, back home, and being made out, and stamped, a common harlot who had dishonored her husband's bed. Yes, she had forgotten that for the time being, and all the lovely happiness that had been suddenly shattered—a fool's paradise. But oh, how wonderful a fool's paradise can be. And her expression, if it had been studied, was as peaceful as that of a child.

Slim Travers did not awaken her again, as he crept into the further compartment and prepared for bed. For once, the fact suddenly hit him. He had been so busy and interested that he hadn't taken a drink since the shooting. Now he didn't even want the usual and inevitable night-cap.

"I'll never join Alcoholics Anonymous," he reflected, "but darned if I don't want a glass of cold milk. But I'll have to pass through the bedroom to the kitchen and Bonnie deserves not to be awakened again tonight."

Unknown to himself Travers had a little feeling of consideration, and warmth toward her. She had courage and spunk, both qualities he admired. And she had enough talent, if developed.

Late in the afternoon one of the Koenig brothers, Fred, planed in from the coast. He sought out Slim Travers. That gentleman first took him in to see the strip tease of Bonnie's and then he led him out and propositioned him.

"Here it is, Fred. I have the title, *The Blonde Bombshell*, registered. I have Bonnie Laurie tied up in every kind of contract. We will sell you her title, the life story, including throwing the John out the window, and the shooting of the bandit. Whoever you fellows pick, you can take her strip tease and use some other head of whichever actress you have—some cast off with a name, no doubt."

"Mary Estelle," said Fred, briefly, "a blonde once married to Bill Corning, a bit faded but still voluptuous in the right light."

"Okay, and you can use the carnival. I have the permission, with pay."

"What is it all together?"

"I'll make it all into a package—except the syndicated life story for the newspapers, the tab babies for which P.N.I. offers two grand. I'll give it all together for eighteen grand. The syndication will use the title time and time again."

Koenig pondered.

"Hell," said Travers, "you only get this so cheap because it never

will get the exhibitors seal of approval and you'll have to road show it. I know how you'll do it—exploiting with strip teasers, and everything. You can bring on your gang, a few hams, male and female, and shoot it next week when we play Marion. The few interior shots, as of the hotel room, you can shoot back on the rag-bag set of yours in Hollywood. But you pay the eighteen grand in advance."

"I'm ready, but that Laurie dame must sign as well as yourself and the carnival owner."

Koenig took out three contracts, already made out, and Travers chuckled.

"You do business quick."

"And we make a quickie quick. That's how we stay in business. We will be on at Marion, Sunday, and on the carnival lot, with our lights, portable mike, the platform with the cranes for camera men, all there via our location trailers. Now take me to Laurie."

The two men found her in the trailer, getting ready to cook dinner.

Travers explained, briefly. There was to be a Blonde Bombshell picture, featuring her. Only her body would be used, and another face shown now and again. Her fictional life story would get another two grand. This contract covered eighteen grand. Sign here, three copies.

"You mean," said Bonnie, slowly, "that I am going to get nine thousand dollars and a thousand for a newspaper story—mostly lies—with a title—and all I do is the same act I am doing now for the yokels?"

"That is the ticket," said Travers, and he came as near beaming as Bonnie had ever seen him approach that kindly expression, "which is written because you have an agent-manager-partner that knows a good thing when he sees it and can improve upon opportunity."

Fred coughed. "You are acting in form as in the old days, Slim, when you used to kill 'em every so often out at the big studios. I bet, though you don't know it, that this little woman has something to do with it. We lower class producers buy familiar names, cast-outs by the big companies, before the public is hep to that. We could even use this dame."

"No," said Travers, "that wouldn't do at all. I have big plans for you, haven't I, Bonnie?"

"I hope so," she replied, in a puzzled tone.

Slim seemed a different man, more dominant, with a keenness and virility that had been quite missing from his make-up. No doubt this

came from a sudden chance at money and the quick making of it. What could she have to do with this shift, save that opportunity had thrown her into the kind of show business situations that made for headlines, and so prompted him to make this fast sale to a quickie producer?

Yes, and she was not forgetting, for the desire for revenge was still strong in her, smouldering, never to be extinguished until she could pay back Jim Redwood with the right payment. But she no longer felt the utter underdog. Perhaps Slim needed a woman to mould and to make into something with craft and cunning. And she had come into the foreground to supply just that person. But there was another thing. He broke out a bottle for a toast to the new movie. But it would be the first drink for him, today. Without thought, determination, or resolve, he suddenly had changed from the habit that had been making a confirmed souse out of him.

Bonnie took a high ball, too, and they drank quickly.

Koenig wrote a check, passed it to Travers. The independent producer then glanced at his watch.

"Have to take the next plane back. Our crew'll be on hand Monday. Good-bye, Miss Laurie. You are very pretty. Slim here may take you very far. I see how he looks at you—the money look."

He said so long to Travers, strode out, and the check fluttered into Bonnie's lap.

"I didn't interrupt you, Bonnie, three of that is for the carnival. We split on fifteen grand—and the two for the tabs—eight grand and a half each. I'll write you a check as soon as this goes through. And remember, babe, this is only the beginning—only the beginning.

National news was slow, and the press services grabbed the Pistol Quertman yarn. He had been a bad man at the end of a gun and his operations, particularly in the Hollywood section had been spectacular. That he had been downed with shots from a revolver by a strip tease artist in her trailer, where he had been seeking the girlie show money box—and Bonnie's honor—was the kind of stuff the big sheets used and the tabs licked their lips upon. The follow up would come a few days later when she would pose putting a five grand check into her stocking.

A ghost writer from a syndicate arrived the next morning. He wore a beard and said that he did so because, in his line of work, he was

ashamed to show his face to the world. He asked very few questions, except about the night club, and the window tossing episode.

"I can supply a more colorful past than you ever imagined, sister. After important work in the French underground, you will be half French, and half Swedish. That will account for your blonde hair, for lots of folks don't realize a lotta French dames are blonde. I'll get you into this country. And all you had was your beauty. I like that.

"A poor gal in a great country, first led astray by a handsome play-boy in New York. This will give us the night spots and Park Avenue. Then he leaves you and you are down to your last mink. That goes, too, and broken-hearted you pawn one jewel after another, and bet on the horses. The last horse loses and you leave the city, and take to the tank towns.

"How I will have you suffer. There is a sadism in the female public, the majority being not attractive. They like to see the poor and pretty sister suffer, and how."

"All this being the case," said Bonnie, "I wonder why you came here to interview me?"

"That is part of the set-up. You are supposed to inspire me or something. Is the bottle belonging to the boss around? A few drinks would inspire me more."

She broke out a bottle, from Slim's stock, and he drank quickly and morosely, as if sad and sorry for himself, as indeed he was, having started his youth as a promising dramatist, and novelist. A failure at both, he had sunk to turning out this kind of sob sister material and he did better than any of the women writers. Bonnie was relieved when he took himself off, seemingly untouched by the liquor he had guzzled.

Friday a delegation came with the five grand check, and new pictures were taken, a series of them by a couple of photographers from a picture magazine. After being in bad shape for a while, Pistol Quertman had rallied, and the report was he would recover to serve a various list of sentences if he could live that long.

Friday, too, a location man arrived from the independent company, to get things fixed for a start at the next stand, on Monday morning. Out on Poverty Row, as it was called, though fortunes had been made there, studio work had already started on *The Blonde Bombshell*.

The Koenig brothers turned out B pictures, and a well-known columnist said they went from there to X, Y, and Z with dazzling speed.

They took over several once well-known names, for each quickie—not for the picture, but by the day. They paid, sometimes, as high as five hundreds dollars a day. But in three days, as a rule, they would work the actors and actresses from morning to night, shoot twenty times more scenes a day than the great companies—and with no re-takes. There was a script, of sorts, with a writer always in the studio, or on location, to write needed stuff off the cuff. The brothers could get a complete full length feature into the can for fifty thousand dollars that would have cost one of the major companies a quarter of a million. A wag had called the Koenig boys the original writers of the line, *blood, sweat, and tears*.

The carnival moved out Saturday night. Slim and Bonnie were in their bunks when the trailer was seized, as it appeared, violently jerked, and then towed. Half thrown out of the bed, Bonnie sat up and threw her legs over the side. She turned the switch and lighted a cigarette.

Slim appeared in a silk dressing gown.

"What do you say, kid, to making some coffee. I've been tapering off the booze, maybe too quickly, and my nerves are a bit shaky. The Koenig boys are bringing along a passé Jane I once had under contract, in the old days, who was something to look at in her time. Mary Estelle, you may have seen her as a kid in the middle-talkie days. She was what we called a cliff hanger. That is, she was a star in adventure stories. It will give me the shudders to run into her again. I hate things bobbing up from the past, and there is nothing that gives me the pip more than a once attractive woman who is losing her looks and battling against time."

Bonnie started putting coffee into the pot.

"I hate the past, in capital letters," she murmured. "Slim, I never told you the story of my past life."

"I know that you have been hurt, and seen better days, as the old song goes, that you were a lady to start with. That kind of upbringing doesn't rub off very fast."

"Well, I feel like unbosoming tonight. I want someone to tell me that I was the perfect fool I see myself."

She finished making the coffee. They sipped, and the motion of the trailer became more steady. On the highway, she gave him an account of her sheltered upbringing, that had taught her practically nothing, and of the sudden shock with the death of her parents.

"It all sounds like a romance that ended in dirty, smokey ashes.

There at the funeral was the handsome stranger, in an officer's uniform, who introduced himself as a pal of my brother, who was killed in the war. This man—Jim Redwood—was in the investment business, and he helped me over the shock, and into what appeared to be a lovely future. Oh, yes, he was kind and gentle—or a good enough actor to know just the way to act to gain the confidence of a girl. I was a little over twenty-one, but I didn't have as much sense as many a girl of sixteen. I never thought to investigate his past, or his claims, took this stranger out of nowhere, you might say, on his own valuation. And then we were married.

"I must say that he gave me—not my money's worth—that sounds vulgar—but he loaned me glamour and romance. And he was a sweet lover. Why not? I am sure that he was a professional, and so his way was slow and easy, from one stage to another, until our nights, to me, were one transport of passion after another. I was in a kind of happy daze. What little brain I had was quite benumbed.

"Of course he handled my affairs, and when he said sign here, and there, I signed. Talk of transfers meant nothing to me. What he was doing, of course, was having me put into his name, in a legal manner, all the real estate and stocks and bonds, of the estate. That wasn't enough for him. I wasn't enough. No doubt he had his own kind of moll somewhere in the background. I think I saw her once—a supposed widow. Brenda something or other.

"Jim brought on a cousin, an actor from New York. One night I'm sure I was given sleeping pills. It was all calculated. When he slapped me hard, to bring me to consciousness, and to call me a tramp, I was in bed, with nothing but a silk bra on, and he pulled the sheet from me. Respectable witnesses were there. While the actor, in his pajamas was saying how he loved me, and would marry me, a detective took a flashlight of it all.

"I went to the bank next day, got the bad news. Jim had left me over seven hundred dollars—enough to get away with—as he had calculated. And I fled—"

"That first part might have deceived a woman with experience. The sap part was the fleeing," remarked Slim. "For all might have been made right, with the aid of a good criminal lawyer. This Redwood must have had a record as a confidence man. I doubt that he was doing anything, at the start but impersonating an officer. It is all too pat. By running, you confessed guilt. I suppose he obtained a divorce by default."

"Yes, that is the way it was," returned Bonnie, listlessly.

"Whenever a man's past is filled with rotten holes, he can't fill up, there is always a possibility of revenge, and getting your own back. But you must be in the right position, successful, and owner of a particular kind of ammunition."

"I'd do anything, *anything*, to ruin him—as he ruined me," affirmed Bonnie, almost tearfully.

"Humph. You'll be given a chance to do what you call anything," exclaimed Slim, cynically. "If you stick, you'll go to the top, with me. It's a rocky road, as the saying goes, and sometimes the rock may be a man in bed with you. But no use crossing into the boudoir until we come to it. Thanks for making the coffee, babe. If a guy didn't know all the treachery every female hides in her, he could find you mighty sweet."

"He would be deceiving himself," said Bonnie, "for all that sweetness has turned sour. From now on, with your help, Slim, I'm a gal on the make, but nothing petty. Larceny, in a big way!"

He mustn't know, she thought, that it would be mighty easy, to find him, behind the mask of cynicism, very sweet himself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE Koenig party arrived in Marion on Sunday, with great trailers, and trucks, some open with cranes and long snake-like projections for lights and cameras. The day was all set for the location period of the movie, since, because of a local ordinance, the carney couldn't show on Sunday.

The actors and actresses, eight in number, came in a taxi from the airport. Bonnie recognized Mary Estelle, because she was the only blonde in the batch. Mary had one of those over-proud, disdainful manners that might have been all right, once, when she had been one of the queens of the major lots, but now a bit out of place. She held her shoulders as if shrinking from her surroundings.

Mel Melton, the director, and Slim Travers, led Mary Estelle toward Bonnie, where she stood outside the girlie show.

"This is Miss Bonnie Laurie, Mary, the artist you will depict. Only they'll use your head and her body in the strip shots."

Bedtime Blonde

Mary nodded. "I wouldn't let myself be involved in such vulgarity if mother weren't ill."

"And if you hadn't lost your looks," said Bonnie, dryly. "For if you weren't all washed up you wouldn't be with a quickie."

The woman's fingers clenched, and red flared into her cheeks.

"Slim, do I have to be insulted by this, this . . ."

"Hey, Mary," put in the director, "you're getting four hundred smackers a day—for your name—and you'll do what you are told or I'll ship you back to that moth-eaten villa with a garden in the swimming pool 'cause you can't pay the water rates."

Mel Melton blew a whistle. Trucks started toward the girlie show. The tent had not been put up, over it, nor the dressing rooms at the back. Bonnie dressed in the trailer. The other girls had been hired for the day.

The director jerked a finger toward a thin man who was to play Pistol Quertman.

"Good we got Pistol to sign for his life story," Mel told Slim, "beating the Burlown Company by half an hour. Good you got the brothers into this quick as you did, Slim. Pistol needs clean money bad. Two grand did the trick. We are going to have him and the blonde bomb-shell boy-and-girl sweethearts. Then he sticks up a bank, and she leaves him, to work as a secretary before a play-boy runs her ragged and leaves her. The big scene in the trailer, we will do, really, over-size, back on the set in Hollywood. He will want her to go away with him, and then when she refuses he makes a rough play and gets the bullets. Say, this will have most everything."

"I should have charged more."

"You got the limit, because between Blondie's life story and that of Pistol we get a million dollars worth of free advertising and publicity. The brothers are crazy like foxes."

The cameras were soon set to take, from two angles, as Bonnie did her strip tease, following the work of the other girls.

Mel explained to Slim that much would never get on many screens because of local and state censorship. But it would all be shown at club dates, stag affairs, and prints would get into certain Central American and South American countries.

Following Bonnie's act, for the stage and background, Mary Estelle with the same type of black waist, and fur, walked here and there for head shots. Several of these would be cleverly superimposed on Bonnie's body, to make it appear that Mary was doing the work

for which, even if inclined, she no longer had the supple figure and never had the bosom.

She left the stage at the back, passing Bonnie.

"I'd rather starve than do such filthy work. Darn good thing I have a young slut as a stand-in."

Bonnie swung hard, and she had quite a right, it appeared, for she struck Mary on the side of the chin, and Mary took a spring backward, tripped over a box, rolled to the ground, her head landing on some loose wire. She moaned, half out, and two men ran to pull her loose from the wire. She came away, leaving two long golden braids.

One fellow held them up, like shining snakes, and she began crying, while she felt her jaw.

She snatched at the two braids and ran with them, toward the women's dressing tent, followed by Bonnie's taunting laughter.

"What goes here?" asked Slim.

"She said she was glad she had a slut as a stand-in. I gave her a good one."

"Mary deserved it. She had no right to insult you. Keep away from her."

"I will if she keeps away from me."

Mel Melton was shouting with glee.

"One of my cameramen got all that. What action! What a right! Two jealous strip teasers fighting on the carney lot."

"You'll have to cut out the phoney blonde braids," Bonnie told him, "but you are welcome to my right. I hope I broke her jaw."

"No, no, she must be in forty more scenes today."

The director was here to work 'em, and how he did make 'em sweat. At noon he took the actor playing Pistol and the camera equipment down to the main street of Marion to use a bank for an exterior shot of the gunman making an entrance for a holdup. Also, down town, he had two actors put on guards' uniforms, and go through an armed car hoist with Pistol. Right along, all day sound was recorded, the cameras worked away, and the entire picture would be finished in nine days production time. It might not be art, and the effect might be a bit crude and melodramatic. It might be lacking in the nuances of fine acting and the subtle shades of light and shadow, but it would be quite an achievement in technique and speed considering the time consumed. There was one sure thing;

everybody connected with this outfit would earn whatever they received.

Bonnie loitered about, interested in what was taking place, for this was a new and interesting world to her. She watched the quick run-throughs, hardly to be called rehearsals, and then the signal for sound and camera. The way they followed around on the cranes fascinated her, as did the technical men who were ever on the right spot. The scenes, as to continuity made no sense, the players doing what they were told without knowing the reason for it. But Mel Melton and his script man knew what they wanted, and they were getting it, even if a great Hollywood director would have wanted it different.

She always stood at a distance, behind the director, so as not to be in the way. He didn't have a chair, with his name on the back of it. But was on the go, in old riding boots, a seemingly tireless figure.

Out of the corner of her eyes, as you see something without actually seeing the whole picture, Bonnie saw Mary Estelle, when she wasn't working, hanging about with Slim Travers. She was leaning on his arm or, with her own familiarly about his shoulders. Two old Hollywood buddies were reunited. It never occurred to Bonnie that Slim was really only trying to keep peace on the lot. Mary didn't come near her again. Perhaps she was afraid that her expensive false teeth would be jammed down her throat.

Mel Melton noticed that the strip teaser was watching his work hour after hour.

"Interested in all this, girlie?"

"Yes, I find the way you handle everything fascinating. You must know what you want, and then get it."

"Well, babe, that is interesting. Most Janes are only absorbed when their own pans are being photographed, and the only part of the film they ever notice is when they are on the screen. That's why when you call for animation they look like fish. There is no mind to mirror emotion on the pussies, aside from jealousy or catty temper. They can all yell: 'Get out-get the hell out', and do it swell. Keep on studying, young lady. It may help you if Slim Travers takes you along. He's a highflier—I mean he was once—and I haven't seen him duck for a quick one today. I'd love to see him back. He never threw his weight around with a stuffed shirt, thirty pounds pressure, in front of his chest."

"Thanks, Mr. Melton."

Bedtime Blonde

"And if you are ever in Hollywood don't look me up. Most extras I get for free, and my players are has-beens, or relatives of the brothers."

He turned to start another short scene, and Bonnie kept right on watching.

At lunch time she walked toward the trailer, and then she heard voices, those of Slim Travers and Mary Estelle. They were laughing, talking over old times, and in all probability he had invited her in to have lunch with him. She remembered the cold ham, and pickles, and milk she had looked forward to sharing. Well, never be a spoilsport. She wandered back, shared in the movie commissary, trying not to feel hurt. She hoped Slim didn't tell her that she slept in the trailer, for the woman would put the natural emphasis on that. Possibly she imagined he batched in the trailer, alone.

All the talking scenes were shot on Sunday. On Monday the players went through the outlines of action, against the background of the carney crowd. The only sound of a voice was that of the ballyhoo man doing his pitch at the girlie platform. The throngs and the blare of the carney, with the cast going hither and thither, would all be blended in with the sequences taken on Sunday, so the audience wouldn't know when one started and another finished. Thus mob scenes were taken, without hiring any mob, a carney minus the expense of putting one on a production lot. The brothers were famed for this sort of thing.

That afternoon, and night, Bonnie felt an increased disgust at her strip act. She loathed the wolf calls, the leering faces that gazed at her with desire, the cheap leachery of the appeal, and the scent of the perfume the other gals doused themselves with, mixed with the sweat of the crowds, and the jangle-jangle of the noise that seemed never to cease. It made her feel unclean. With their eyes these males, for a few coins, possessed her for an instant as she swayed before them. Her body might as well be naked. As she swiftly disappeared, she could hear one long drawn out half sigh, half sob, of unsatisfied passion. Yes, she cheated them, that was the only thing that partly satisfied her. But that she was a sex bait, a magnified peep show, always made her leave the last strip of the night with a weary and tart: "That's over for the night. Now, until tomorrow. To the devil with the customers."

The actors and actresses were to have planed back to Hollywood that evening but there had been storm warnings, and a dangerously

low ceiling. So flights were called off. There would be one flight at eight in the morning.

Walking toward the trailer, Bonnie felt low in spirit. The carney folks were okay, pleasant and democratic. But she had felt bitterly the contempt of Mary Estelle. Added to that was a species of jealousy for which she could hardly account. She knew that Slim Travers, once at the top as a flesh peddler, and now on the way back, had been cured of love by a double-crossing wife.

So she had been glad, in a way, that she was quite safe with him, that there was no danger of his laying his hands upon her in desire. They were like a couple of friends, working 50-50 against the world—a world that must be schemed against in order to get the good things it had to offer.

But that he should find pleasure in the company of this voluptuous blonde, annoyed her. She was aware that, as a man—though love might be out of the picture for him—he must have the usual carnal longings, and the urge to satisfy them.

Naturally, Bonnie didn't know the past. Slim Travers was forty-four years old, not old as men go, but twice her age. He was battling Hollywood before she was born, struggling with the starts of the talking pictures that had turned the colony upside down. In those days Slim had had a short affair with Mary Estelle, and in the present tense he was being polite, and cordial, to an old trouter, as he thought of her, whose youth was almost gone. She was headed for Skid Row, Bonnie knew, because when she was in the chips she hadn't saved her money. A gal who went along on her looks, and lost them had no way of coming back.

Bonnie was also unaware that Mary Estelle had enough shrewdness to suspect that Slim Travers, who had never lost his touch, but who had nearly hit bottom through booze and woman trouble, was going to get in the money again.

So Mary Estelle did not go downtown, with the others, to check into a hotel, and wait for an early call for the plane. She was under the mistaken impression that Slim Travers had a trailer by himself. No one had told her differently and, anyway, he gave little attention, save professionally, to that strip tease tramp. So she found the location of the trailer. The door was ajar. She entered, without turning on the light, found Slim's bunk, pulled it down into a bed.

His things were all about. There were toilet articles and she could see a set of old-fashioned razors, the long shaving strap.

Mary giggled in the semi-darkness, as she undressed, having some difficulty with the hooks of the girdle that held her into some shape. She had brought a sheer nightie along. This she slipped into with a sigh of relief. Then she snuggled into bed, against the wall, pushed her unloosened golden hair about the pillow, in what she thought was pretty disarray. It was a warm night. Lying on one side; her body would gleam through the thin silk. In comparison to these carney sluts she would appear bewitching, glamorous. And she was ready, for a worthwhile future, ready to give and give and give—with all the training she had learned from a score of lovers who had all finally tired of her and turned to more supple and harder-to-get youth.

Now, as she walked toward the trailer, Bonnie merely thought that Slim had kept himself very scarce tonight. Perhaps he had drifted downtown with the others. She had heard that the flight was off. Her assumption was right. Slim had gone along with the director, to take a few drinks, but not more, and get a line on the local gossip in movieland. He had never missed an issue of *Variety*, but there were studio undercurrents that even that crack weekly of show biz didn't want to touch until actual news broke for print.

Who was producer Sam Milt living with, now that he had given the gate to Millie Madison? Boots Cantwell? Then she would be getting the better new roles in the cycle of crime and war pictures. Just what banks were moving in on certain companies for first money? And was Ed Merlow still in actual charge of the Belo lot, since he had been divorced by the daughter of the real backer of the concern—whose name was never mentioned in print because he had terrific industry standing in steel, but whose whisper over long distance from Bethlehem, Pa. was law and order? That kind of thing. . . .

Bonnie, humming a tune to herself, that she had no idea of, distinguishing, opened the door of the trailer. She stepped in, almost bumped against a chair that Slim always was in the habit of pushing to one side. In a trailer, as on a shipshape boat, there had to be a place for everything. As she touched the chair, her fingers felt something soft and silky, and there was an unfamiliar perfume of violets that permeated the small space.

In an instant her thumb and forefinger felt for the switch, and she turned on the light.

She gasped. Her dismay was succeeded by bitter anger, as she saw Mary Estelle lying in Slim's bed, all pink and lacy, her form—with too much bust and buttocks—clearly revealed under the sheer silk.

So, she reflected, a flood of madness making her shake in a kind of insanity—he thinks he is going to bring a wanton into the trailer he shares with me!

"I'll show him, I'll show him!" she stormed, and she reached for the razor strap. It was a long one of Russian leather, and she pulled it from the wall in a quick snap.

Mary Estelle stirred, for she had been half asleep, and the sudden light half blinded her.

"Is that you, darling. Is that you, Slim?"

"No, it isn't Slim, Mary. So you have contempt for me, eh?"

Mary rolled over on her stomach, and Bonnie's eyes gladdened, as she raised the strap and with all her strength brought the leather down on Mary's fanny, cutting through the silk and raising a welt.

Time and time again she raised that strap and it fell like a burning flame, cutting into the other's flesh. Mary screamed and yelled in pain and hurt, unable to defend herself. Then tears came, and through them came her plea:

"Stop, stop. Please, please!"

Bonnie was panting. She did finally cease. Afterwards she bundled up Mary's clothes and turned to the door to throw them out and send the woman after them. But the door opened and there stood Slim Travers, and a throng of show people, all wondering if a murder was taking place.

"Here is your trollop," yelled Bonnie. "And I've been giving it to her where you'll get no pleasure out of her tonight! I've always wanted to whip the harlot strain out of a harlot, and—"

"Stop it, Bonnie, stop it!"

Slim's commanding voice broke through her hysteria.

"I didn't invite Mary here tonight. It must have been a cute idea of her own. Now, let her get dressed."

"She will get dressed outside."

Bonnie kicked the door open, and threw the clothes out.

"And now you, Mary, you get out, too, or—"

The woman whispered, and crept from the bed, not feeling safe until she stood at the door, her blood-stained nightie in shreds.

"I'll have the law on you. I'll—"

"You'll do nothing," said Slim, sternly. "If you had spoken to me I'd have told you I shared one trailer with Bonnie. And we both sleep alone. You shouldn't have tried such a cheap, old trick. We were through twenty years ago."

The door slammed shut.

"I must get a lock and a couple of keys for us," Slim went on. "You are sure keeping up your record of being a tempestuous creature. But tonight I can hardly blame you. But don't pose, or think, in such a virtuous manner. You are going to put aside some of that virtue, my sweet, when we reach Hollywood, for virtue is a commodity that has absolutely no market value there. I'm going to sell you high, babe, when I am ready, so forget this harlot and trollop stuff until you get into a scene on a production set where it might be called for.

"As for this bit tonight I'm going downtown and tell Melton about it. He will see it as a swell bit, worked around for the movie. A woman flogging a woman for sweet virtue's sake—or maybe a little jealousy in back of it all. Hey, kid, you and I are going along with no clinch stuff. Now go to bed, and try to control that temper. From now on you take dictation—from me. I'm not going to make a star out of a hell cat."

CHAPTER NINE

ON the last day of the season, the week end of lovely autumn weather, Slim drove Bonnie to the airport. He waited until her luggage was weighed and told her he would be in touch with her in about five weeks. He gave her a wave of the hand and was off in his car to Hollywood.

"Sister, you can't have any secrets in that little burg. You have to do it my way."

The way seemed off to Bonnie. However, she was under orders when she planed to New York with several grand in cash in her bag—three grand in the bank and the rest of what she had received in connection with *The Blonde Bombshell*, turned over to Slim for future investment.

On Madison Avenue she looked up Slim's one time New York agent, a bird named Gallows Morton, so-called because of his sad and morose expression. He turned Bonnie over to his wife who got her an apartment. She was an old ex-actress. She took her on a shopping tour for the very best in clothes. After a month, Bonnie took several weeks of a very special kind of Swedish language study.

Finally came the wire from Slim. That was the cue for Bonnie to

plane to Hollywood. She arrived in the morning in time for the afternoon papers. There were reporters and photographers at the airport.

Slim's line was an odd and new one, based on perplexity. He had Bonnie Laurie billed as his new Swedish discovery, who only talked with a slight accent. Yet, of course, she had gained nation wide notoriety as Bonnie Laurie, the strip tease dancer. Let the press worry about that. Two girls with the same name could be a coincidence. Double stories would intrigue. Slim started with the advantage of a well-known name.

To the gossip hounds, two of 'em women, he gave the same answer, "This is my imported discovery. She is a lady. Judge for yourself if I'm trying to smuggle a strip tease bum in disguise into Hollywood."

The plane came to a stop. After waiting as coached, Bonnie came out, followed by a personal maid chosen by Gallows Morton.

Bonnie didn't have to try to act the lady. She had been brought up in refinement. As yet, she hadn't reverted far enough from it with the carney. It wasn't difficult to appear poised and proud in a gray tailored suit that fitted her like a glove and a little beret poised on her lovely hair.

"I—I am to see a Mr. Travers, I believe," she murmured in a slight Swedish accent that sounded piquant.

"Miss Laurie, these are ladies and gentlemen of the press. What have you to say to them?"

"Only that I love this great big America. I find the women beautiful and the men wonderful. As to my future plans I have no idea of working on the stage nor on the screen set, for possibly a year or two. My family is, what you would say, wealthy. Mr. Travers has written me. He has taken for me a little place in—is it called Beverly Hills?"

"Gart Goner has left to make some British films. I've rented his shabang for Miss Laurie," said Slim, dryly.

There was a whistle and a murmur. It was a show-place with one of the best views and swimming pools in the district. He should know, having paid several thousand a month to rent it. He also knew it would take thousands to keep it up with servants and the rest for entertainment.

"Maybe Miss Laurie will be persuaded to make a movie here?" asked one columnist, with a cynical emphasis on the word persuaded. "Slim Travers isn't in the agent game for his health."

"I pay Mr. Travers whether I decide against working in Hollywood

or not," said Bonnie, calmly. "Now, as I am a bit tired, I trust I shall be left to the privacy I desire while continuing to study this wonderful and amazing country."

She went toward the awaiting car, followed by the maid, Slim and a porter with luggage.

Slim turned and shouted, "I forgot to tell you something, boys and girls. There is going to be a party for the press on Saturday night. Come one, come all! But *no* photographers and *no* movie people. The press can get drunk alone."

He held Bonnie's elbow getting into the car as if she might be a princess.

"We have 'em puzzled and worried. They don't want to pull a boner and have a libel suit on their hands. That you act the lady knocks 'em cold. They know strip tease types off the stage. They'll buzz like bees. And, baby, you will act hard to get. And there will be no bid from me for a role for you until everything is ripe and waiting. And no screen test. To hell with it! Tests have ruined more budding reps than anything in Hollywood."

As he spoke, Bonnie closed her eyes. Everything seemed unreal. Life seemed more unreal when the car climbed and climbed, round and round, into the hills. It finally entered through open gates and toward a Spanish nightmare type of stucco house that was as big as a jail. Gardens were at one side, a swimming pool behind.

"You rented this for me?" whispered Bonnie.

"Sure. Start big. Don't ask favors. Wait until the right time and then strike. Here is a town where they hate you when you are down. They only admire you when you are up. So I'm having you start *up*. It will be easier going on from there."

"But—"

"I sold a girlie show with a carney that I own for thirty grand."

"That sounds vulgar, Mr. Travers. What is thirty grand?"

Slim chuckled. "You will do, Bonnie. You will do. What that maid of yours doesn't know won't hurt her. Most of the movie gossip of inside stuff comes from personal maids. Hold your cards to your chest."

"What a quaint American expression," she drawled, with that little accent she had been taught so well. "You are very amusing, Mr. Travers."

"Call me Slim," he said, quickly. "Don't play the lady so hard when we are alone. It makes me uncomfortable. This lady business in Holly-

wood and Los Angeles is too common. Every secretary and gal behind a counter acts as if she were a countess in disguise, just working for a lark. I must say you don't overdo it. Now, act dead till Saturday night when we entertain the press. Mind you, no interviews with some chatty female cuddling secrets at your feet. I'm going to make you surrounded with walls until. . . ."

He smiled a bit bitterly. Bonnie wondered what thought he had tasted that brought such a cynical and disgusted expression to his face?

That afternoon while relaxing in her home, Bonnie noticed in the entertainment section of the Los Angeles newspapers photos of the Swedish import, Bonnie Laurie, and the notorious strip tease gal, Bonnie Laurie. Odd resemblance. But the former did not wish to enter the movies. Her family was rich. She even had taken over that great show place—the great Gart Goner mansion. Where would the strip teaser get the dough for that? And she acted the lady to perfection with a slight charming accent.

What was Slim Travers up to? With a view to libel, the articles were handled diplomatically. They aroused interest.

Slim had taken a small office on Yucca street. It was a part of one occupied by a general agency. He only wanted a desk, two chairs and a telephone. For several weeks, aside from that party Saturday night, he would circulate around, get his bearing and search for that spot for Bonnie.

He took over Ed Timmings, one of the best press agents in Hollywood, between long periodic drunks. As a result, Bonnie was given dignified publicity with photos taken at Curian's, the best spot on the coast. No bathing pictures or "cheese-cake"—the type of photos a studio always started with on a new starlet. And none of that old gag of being seen around with well-known leading men or that build-up of fake romances for the gossip writers. That made a gal look shopworn before she began. Bonnie was to be handled in a discreet manner.

The finest drama coach Slim was able to find gave her lessons daily. At night she studied the movie pictures run off in the owner's own projection room. Several times Slim took her, beautifully gowned with her lovely hair plaited in simple school girl style, to Mike Romanoff's. Tea was all she had. Slim consumed a few highballs but he counted and spaced his drinks these days.

On Friday, Slim made arrangements with the bartender's union for two men for Saturday night. Goner had erected what he called a

rumpus room near the swimming pool, complete with bar, slot machines and saw-dust on the floor. It had been made roughly, in wild West style and the only harm the customers could do was to themselves. Too many chateaus in Beverly Hills had been wrecked by drinking parties. This way, everybody had a swell time. And the pool was near for sobering up. Goner had locked up all his own liquor stock in the cellar. Slim broke it open and took several cases of rye and scotch. He had the draft beer sent from downtown. Also, a case of gin and one of mixed French and Italian vermouth for Martini or Manhattan cocktails. Brandy, he figured, was too expensive for this crowd.

No doubt, aside from Washington, Hollywood has more correspondents than any other city in the country. About ninety boys and girls showed up—so-called if they were middle-aged. Weddy Popper and Jimmy Bitler came, as well as a string of folks who covered the movie-land for England, France and other European countries.

Drinking became fast and furious. Free loading was a delight to these people. Slim had Bonnie stay away until, he thought, the writers would be half drunk. Then they would forget the answers to any questions they asked. But he hadn't counted on Weddy Popper in a flower garden hat and shrewd eyes that missed nothing. She had brought along Ludar Hartlein, the correspondent from Sweden, who covered a number of papers there and also in other Scandinavian countries.

The party had ebbed outside. It was a hot night with a bright moon. Drinks were carried to the little tables and to the reclining chairs, that fringed the swimming pool.

Bonnie was talking to Jimmy Bitler when Weddy Popper approached, her arm linked in that of a tall and distinguished blond gentleman.

"Miss Laurie," she said, in a ringing voice, "I am sure that you grow lonely for the sound of your native tongue. So I have the pleasure of introducing you to a well known Swedish correspondent, Ludar Hartlein. I know you two will have lots to talk about."

The Swede bowed from the waist and smiled. Then he took Bonnie's hand, kissed it like a courtier, and began to speak to her in his native tongue which, naturally, was Greek to Bonnie. She felt herself standing there being watched by a dozen correspondents. They instantly caught on to the exposé that Weddy had so maliciously planned.

"I—I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Hartlein. But as fellow Swedes, we must not embarrass these correspondents by talking before them—in a language they cannot understand. Will you take a stroll with me for a few minutes?"

He bowed and the two walked away. Hartlein continued to babble in his native tongue.

"Sir," Bonnie almost whispered, "you are of course aware that I am a fraud?"

He nodded. "Yes, I thought that. I never heard of you in the native papers. If you are a fraud, you have honored my country. You are lovely. To think you are trusting yourself to me. I do not like that fat and ugly creature with the parody hats. Let's talk a little while and you shall see."

They talked indifferently and then returned to the group. Hartlein was laughing as if he had heard a good joke.

"Thanks for introducing me to Miss Laurie," he said to Weddy. "We found we had mutual acquaintances back home and Miss Laurie has met some of my old pals in the newspaper game. It is delightful to meet a beautiful native so far from the northern land. I'm going to call one afternoon and get an exclusive interview for my papers."

"Yes, that will be a pleasure," said Bonnie. "Thanks, Miss Popper, for bringing us together."

Slim Travers sighed with relief. He had wanted controversy but not *exposé*. Now he watched Weddy's face which had turned a bright crimson. She felt that she had been tricked. There was nothing for her to do but admit defeat. The headline she had projected in her mind's eye had turned into a blank space.

She turned and walked toward the pool. Bonnie strolled after her, drink in hand. As she was directly behind Weddy, Bonnie tripped. With a little scream she thrust out her left hand to catch hold of Weddy's shoulder. Instead, she accidentally pushed her and Weddy, flower hat and all, fell into the pool.

The water wasn't deep, at this point. It was not more than four feet. As she came to her feet, she looked drenched and furious.

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry," said Bonnie. "Such a terrible accident. Will someone pull the poor creature out."

The men tried to keep straight faces. The women laughed. Weddy was jerked from the pool. Fuming she marched away to her car. Other gossip writers would have juicy material on this episode that would make her something of a laughing stock.

"What a strange accident," murmured Jimmy Bitler.

"Yes, wasn't it?" said Bonnie. "I'm sure she will never forgive me."

"She doesn't like anybody. People have to play up to her, because she has a string of a hundred newspapers. That story of her trying to expose you, through Hartlein, the Swedish ace, and landing in the swimming pool will certainly get in other columns, if not in her own."

Bonnie laughed. She had a clear laugh, robust and delightful.

"It was long before your time, Miss Laurie. But you remind me of Jean Harlow, the poor gal who died before her youth was gone. She made a hit in her first movie, *Hells Angels*, the only woman in the cast. I hope that when you do get appealing offers, you'll get such a break."

"Thanks, Jimmy," she murmured. "When I do you'll be the first to know."

He grinned. Being on a national radio hook up every week, it was worth while giving him exclusive news.

The party broke up in the early hours. After the last boy and girl were bundled into a taxi, Slim walked back to the mansion with Bonnie. He congratulated her on her lucky escape.

"I was lucky enough to meet a gentleman."

"You are not going to be so lucky tomorrow night."

"I don't understand you."

"Well, it is time for a little plain speaking. Let us sit here on the porch."

His tone was cold, stern and crisp. Bonnie realized an important project must be in prospect.

"You know, Bonnie, all this build-up has cost a lotta money. All of it wasn't only to get you what is called a start in pictures. I'd like to land you as a lead right off the bat where you will stand out. One in a movie where there'll be only a few gals and yours will be a stunning role that can make you. There is one in the offing right now at Cosmic Films, called *Island Paradise*. It takes place in the South Pacific with only one white woman in the cast. The other females are natives. There has been quite a lot of shuffling around behind the scenes. This is too important for the company's mere casting department. This is high brass stuff. The decision is up to the director, Townsend Barnes. And he has to make it soon. I've invited him here to dinner tomorrow night in order to meet you. There will be no other guests—not even your manager."

"Well, I'll do my best to impress Townsend Barnes."

"Oh, you will impress him all right. But you will have to do more than that."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Don't play the virgin with me, Bonnie. This is tough, hard stuff. To put it plainly, you will have to sleep with that woman chaser. *But only one night.* I'll be on his tail the next morning, make him phone Murron, the head of the company, that you are his choice. Then, I'll be over at Murron's pronto with a one picture contract. After that you can drop Mr. Barnes like a cold potato. If you wish *let him know you have used him when he thought he was using you.* As the all-woman interest, there is no way to chisel down your role. He will have to go through with it to the best of his ability."

"But is there no other way? You never—"

"I'm not a cheap pimp," said Slim, dryly. "A gal in Hollywood who can't pick her spots can wear out her physical sex apparatus and get nowhere. You want to get to the top. You want your revenge on that louse who married you and ruined you. Then you have to be hard as steel and determined. Make use of your feminine weapons. If you fall down on me now, I'll think this dough wasted and that you're just another soft moll who talks strong and acts weak."

She sat silent. Her imagination was throbbing with distaste at what he suggested.

"You were the Blonde Bombshell. You could throw a guy out of a window, shoot a bandit and get the reward. Then flog a poor has-been blonde. It isn't as if someone suggested you be ruined. You are not a virgin. That blackleg of a confidence man ruined you—even though he went through a legal ceremony. And now, when the big chance comes along, you can't do for a great career what a million gals do for fun. Bonnie—"

"Slim, I never heard you spout so many words. You haven't given me a chance to open my mouth. If there is no other way, bring on this woman crazy director for one night only. I'll give him the best that I have to give. As you say, Slim, the joke will be on him."

But suddenly she began to cry very softly.

"Oh, Slim, being here in this wonderful place, acting like a lady of some importance, I forgot that the way is ahead. We have to use what means we have. . . ."

"Yes, say it. I'm a heel, a pimp, reaching the goal by using you for the bedroom route."

He spat on the marble steps.

"But that is the Hollywood way. Unless you can marry the boss, as several queens of studios have done. It is the power of these little kings in hot pants who pick a woman for a role that may lead to stardom. But I can't change things. I'm not a whoremaster at heart. I'd like to see a fair field for talent. But so long as there are men of high brass and lust and ambitious women who will use their sex, this is not the easiest way. But with a guy like Barnes that is the only way there is. So—"

"No, I will not fail you, Slim. I know our little fortune is thrown into my career. But I'm sorry. I guess I am very ordinary and normal at heart. When I do this, I'm not only going to loathe Townsend Barnes but also you too, Slim Travers."

He arose and clenched his fingers together.

"I've told the housekeeper that cocktails should be served at six and dinner at seven."

"About ten, turn the covers slightly down on the double bed. Switch on the soft pink lights and put out the sheerest lingerie for Hollywood's newest and prettiest harlot."

"Aw, don't make me feel worse than I do, Bonnie," said Slim, desperately. "Think how I'll feel, despising myself. No wonder they call us flesh peddlers."

He swore and stormed off toward his car. Bonnie started to think. You could put it any way you wished, whether it was stardom, a few drinks, a bite to eat or a flop for the night, in each case a girl was selling her body to get what she must have at all costs.

CHAPTER TEN

BONNIE awoke in the enormous bed—one of the special jobs unknown out of Hollywood—and stretched in mental irritation. Her face had a sullen expression. Her beauty reflected a hidden and smouldering fire. She had no idea that Slim Travers had timed it so that she got into a mood of rebellion.

Shandy, the maid, entered and pulled up the curtains a few inches.

"Your bath is ready, my lady," she announced, in her usual tone of disapproval. Shandy had served a Duchess with lovers all over

Europe. Her last mistress had been the mistress of two producers at the same time. So far this woman had lived alone. But Shandy wasn't deceived. One morning she would knock, walk in and find the usual male in the bed. You could bet on it with what she called to herself, high-class female trash. Of course, unconsciously, she got a thrill out of it all. Otherwise, she would have gone into service with a rich and respectable family.

"Mr. Travers telephoned, my lady. The private screen test will be made at ten this morning. The car has been ordered. Your breakfast will be waiting. What costume shall I lay out?"

Bonnie told her. Shandy was perfect but she insisted upon dressing herself.

Young Malcolm Douglas and the dramatic coach had gone over and over the little scene she and the young leading man would enact. Both were letter perfect. Travers had hired the little studio, a first class technical squad and a camera man, who would see that Bonnie's right side of the face would show up to advantage.

Downtown in the little studio, everybody was waiting when Bonnie arrived. A borrowed make-up girl made Bonnie's face up. Then she plunged into one of those tear-up-the-scenery bits in which the man plays straight and takes all the punishment and the woman shows off every trick in the temperamental register of an untamed wild woman.

"Cut," said the dramatic coach. "No use going over that again."

Rushes were to be made. The reel was put in the can and ready to be run off in the projection room at the Beverley Hill manse by five o'clock.

"With all that training and protection, if you don't look good in that," said Travers, "I might as well buy you a load of sleeping pills."

She was hot from the lights.

"Promotion such as you have got costs money. You won't fail me."

"No, flesh peddler," returned Bonnie, sharply.

"I know. The woman pays and pays and pays. She is lucky if she has something worth paying with. I've arranged to have that test run off for you at nine o'clock tonight for Barnes and little Bonnie. Sell yourself well, kid, and I'll sew up that lead in Paradise Island in the morning."

"All right, collector. Do you think I have any respect for you?"

"No one ever cashed respects at the bank."

She turned and stormed toward the car. Travers smiled, watching

her trot out on high spike heels with that superb form and the long and wonderful legs. She had been in just the temper he had calculated. The scene rushed to the developer was one in which anger and resentment had simmered and boiled over. Oh, this wasn't a new angle. Directors had done this sort of thing many times but Bonnie would never realize he had framed her to be in the mood to set off dramatic sparks.

Bonnie was ready at five o'clock. Her hair was done loosely, and glimmered in the soft lights. She was arrayed in a shimmering silk gown of burnished blue that went with the lights in her blue eyes. She was lovely. If resentment still touched her mouth, she didn't show it. She hated the thought of tonight's prospect of giving her body for a purpose. It was cheap and tawdry.

She had enjoyed passion with Redwood. But since the filthy way he had treated her, she had shrunk from the touch of a man. Her natural instincts had been curdled.

Townsend Barnes arrived at a little after six. He was about forty-five, tall, thin and nervous type of man. To her surprise, he seemed to hardly glance at her.

"So you are Slim Travers' new Swedish find," he growled. "I saw that piece of tripe *Blonde Bombshell*. Although you're not in that, you look like the gal who hits her in the jaw. Were you the strip tease artist in reality? The photos look like yours in the life story. This whole jumble-rumble has given you a lot of publicity even though you haven't made a picture as yet."

He followed her inside. She rang for the butler and he brought martinis. This was one night she was going to go overboard on the drinks in order to dull reality.

"You'll see my screen test at nine o'clock," she said. "Try to keep sober until then. As to your questions, if I get that lead in *Paradise Island*, I'll tell you all about me. As of now, I'm not yet bought or delivered."

He drank one cocktail, reached for another.

"Lots of fire, eh? I'm accustomed to have gals cater to me."

"Not to you, Mr. Barnes, but to the power you possess to do something for them. You are not handsome. Your personality doesn't ring bells. No doubt, you have talent as a director. I understand you get your pound of flesh before doing anything for a girl."

"Generally about a hundred and eighteen pounds on the hoof. The heifer runs . . ."



"I'm accustomed to sleeping alone," Bonnie retorted. "But I always say, every man to his fancy, so long as he is willing to pay for it—and my price is high. . . ."

(Specially posed by professional model)

"Well, I'm not the soft simpering type. I haven't had anything to do with a man for a long time, since I was divorced, in fact. I'm accustomed to sleeping alone. Just why—"

"Just why do I insist upon forcing myself on a girl because of the power I possess? Because when I was young and struggling, girls found me unattractive. The damsel I loved heaved me for a pal of mine. I've never married. I guess I have become a sadist. I get pleasure in my power in making a girl my slave for the time being. I despise her but I get pleasure from it. Don't think that I don't realize that if it weren't for my position as a big producer, she wouldn't spit at me. I know that. As it is, in a month or so, I generally tire. In the meantime I'm a conqueror. An Emperor!"

Bonnie listened with sullen fascination.

"Every man to his fancy," she said, "so long as he is willing to pay for it."

The two consumed a string of cocktails before dinner. During the meal, they had wine, with brandy afterward. Bonnie watched to note whether Barnes was still bright-eyed enough to look at the screen test. Indeed, he studied it carefully. He had it run through three times.

"Send that operator home," he said finally. "I think that you'll do."

"Then I get the lead in *Paradise Island*?"

"First you'll have to do a little performing for me. Show me some personal temperament."

Bonnie laughed, as they walked toward her room, where more brandy, soda and ice waited for them. Barnes held his liquor well, but Bonnie was half intoxicated and glad of it.

Barnes locked the door. He grabbed her crudely and the veneer of civilization dropped suddenly from him. Bonnie knew she was at the mercy of a madman. His mouth bruised hers. His strong fingers were like talons. Then the lights were out and he was muttering. "Slave! Slave! Submit! Submit. . . ."

Damn Slim Travers. Bonnie was paying the price and Slim was cold to that payment. Well, someone, she reflected, would have to pay in return for all this. She felt the knife-like thrusts of his cruelty as she submitted to his passion, knowing that she was no better than he. No better than a two dollar harlot, the only difference being in the payment.

His caresses were like vengeance on his own past. There was no tenderness, only savagery.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TOWNSEND BARNES left very early, after having breakfast alone, and drove to the great Cosmic studios. He went to his little office before going to the set. He found Slim Travers there, kidding with his secretary.

"Hello, flesh peddler."

"Hello, Alexander the Great."

"What brings you here so bright and early?"

"The contract. Upstairs they're waiting for your decision on that lead for *Paradise Island*. I want the pleasure of hearing you tell the big shot that little Bonnie Laurie is your choice."

Barnes laughed. His eyes were a bit bloodshot but he was filled with energy.

"I saw the test rushes. Great gal that Bonnie Laurie. Monica, get the King on the telephone."

The secretary glanced up and then away, trying to keep the contempt from her eyes. Beatrice Winsey and Carroll Ann Moore, both of them had up to now been kept in suspense by Barnes.

She put the call through for her boss.

"Hello, King? I've got a great gal for the lead in *Paradise Island*. Saw her test last night. Bonnie Laurie is the name."

"Oh, yes, lots in the paper about her today. It seems she threw the hat queen into the pool. Weddy tried to expose her. But Hartlein, correspondent for the Swedish press, swears she's the real stuff. And yet there's a life story of a strip tease artist—a poor man's Gypsy Rose Lee—running in a syndicate tie up. It's the same gal in one of the biggest mansions on the heights. Who's her agent?"

"Slim Travers. He's here and about to come over. He's her personal manager, too." After making his way through four female obstacles, Slim finally made his way into a big room where a meek, middle-aged man sat behind a table with only press buttons on it.

The King pressed a button. A lawyer entered. Another button. His contract advisor. Third button. A secretary with a pad.

"Here's the picture, King." Slim said. "I want Bonnie Laurie signed up for one picture—one picture only. This one. I want fifty grand

with an option to meet any other long term contract which may present itself afterwards."

The King nodded to the lawyer. He made a spiel that they didn't do business that way. The contract advisor took it from there.

Slim cut them short. "Townsend Barnes sleeps with every leading woman he ever signs. He's a heel and a no-account. But you must admit one thing. He never signed any dame that didn't have talent. His career comes before his bedtime pleasures. He saw the test—"

"We want to make our own test," said the King.

"I made the test. I have a copy of it in my pocket. Send it to the projection room and take a look-see for yourself."

Travers handed over a package. King didn't touch it. His secretary bounded forward. He nodded and followed her from the room. In fifteen minutes he was back. He rubbed his hands together.

"Okay?"

"Okay. Fix up a contract. Fifty grand, no options except the chance to meet any bid on a long term contract. Slim, let my press department take over from here."

"You're the King, but tell 'em, no cheese cake. Whatever she was before, Bonnie Laurie is now a distinguished Swedish import. No bathing shots playing with a duck. No prat falls. She can show sport clothes and new styles from abroad. Oh, yes, and don't forget. In that contract, we only pay you 25 percent on any money from advertising and testimonials."

"Put that in, boys," said the King. Then he smiled absently and departed to play golf.

Travers left, too, but he called his own press agent to tell the evening sheets that the price was a hundred grand.

Back in a small apartment on the top floor of a ten story building, a pretty girl entered and placed a bundle of unpaid laundry on the table. She threw the evening edition tabloid on a chair. Going to the ice box in the tiny kitchen, she took out a bottle of milk and poured herself a glass.

Beatrice Winsey had been down on her luck for a year. She had started in show business as a dancer in a New York musical. A talent scout had given her a screen test. Then she became a starlet for twenty weeks at \$75 a week with options going upward and upward to dizzying sums if she was successful. She had been given several small roles, then she was dropped. She lived by the telephone, waiting for calls from her agent or casting directors.

Bedtime Blonde

Then she heard of the role in *Paradise Island*. She had managed to get an interview with Townsend Barnes. He liked her fragile prettiness. Then the inevitable happened. He moved in on her for several nights. She was one girl, who strange as it may appear, had been one of the virgins of Hollywood. But what good had her virginity done in getting her ahead? So she had fallen. Although Barnes hadn't actually promised her the role, she thought it was all in the bag. No man could be *that* dishonorable!

Beatrice went to the window, picked up the newspaper and turned to the entertainment section. Headlines screamed at her:

BONNIE LAURIE GETS COVETED ROLE IN PARADISE ISLAND

The girl tore the page in rage, threw the tabloid on the floor and stamped upon it.

She began to cry. While she cried, she stumbled to the window. She pulled up the lower pane. She closed her eyes like a child and she felt the open space with trembling fingers.

No one saw her fall.

A bystander called the police. An ambulance came. The girl was identified by the janitor of the building. Her papers only gave scant space to the suicide. Another failure in Hollywood who couldn't take it.

When Townsend Barnes came to his office the following morning, the write up in the Los Angeles Examiner was on his desk.

"Who put this here?" he asked, shaking with rage.

"I did," his secretary said. "I thought you might like to read about it. You ought to be proud!"

Barnes balled the paper in his hand and threw it at the floor. "I'll fire you for this!" he shouted.

"With all that I know, you wouldn't dare!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE sessions with the scenic designer, with his little models, and the scenario writers; going through the shooting script, had been long and

tiresome. Townsend Barnes was glad when he could call it a day. Then, he drove to The Brown Derby for a few quick afternoon ones.

As Barnes entered, and strolled to his favorite table, he noted that eyes were averted. He missed the usual "Hello, Townie". The waiter, Paul, lacked his professional welcome. The martini tasted flat. He ordered a second. No one approached him. Several women that he knew well, gave him that blank stare of unrecognition. Barnes tossed down a third cocktail, threw a bill on the table and went out to his car. He drove out to the manse now occupied by Bonnie Laurie.

The new lead for Paradise Island sat on the terrace. An enormous umbrella was placed that she lay in the shadows. A tall drink reposed in her hands. Her long legs were carelessly dangling—a strip of white flesh showing above the knees.

The director approached and bent to caress her.

Bonnie turned her head. "Not this afternoon, Townie. Pick up the white 'phone and order a drink."

There were two telephones on the table. One to the butler's. The second an outside line.

"You're cool today, Bonnie," he said flatly.

"That's a permanent condition so far as you're concerned. The show's over. The contract is signed."

"I don't quite understand."

"I'll explain in words of one syllable. You got away with a kind of willing rape since I needed this lead. Very likely, if you wanted to, you could obstruct if not stop the contract. That's your choice to make. But I'm making mine. There'll be no encore. If there is, I'll call it real rape and yell for the police. As things stand right now, Townie, the police are the last people you want to see. They'd have no case, but there's a morals clause in your contract, and there are lots of newspaper wolves who'd love to sink their fangs into your hide!"

He smiled, but only with his eyes. "Let's change the subject," he said. "I want to talk with you about the script. We go into production in a couple of weeks."

"Business, yes, Townie. Business is something that I'm willing to see you about, any time and any place. I've thrown out some torn clothes and a ripped nightie. The last of my intimate apparel you'll ever see, off of a sound stage. . . ."

She laughed and her laugh was cruel.

Just then the outside telephone rang. Bonnie leaned forward and picked up the receiver.

"Townie, it's for you."

"Oh, I said I'd be coming here for a conference."

He took the 'phone.

"Hello, this is Townsend Barnes. Who is this? The publicity office of Cosmic? Who wants to talk to me? Ben Carter? Okay, put him on."

Bonnie watched as he listened. Veins in his forehead started to swell. Then a mottled crimson rose in his cheeks and he wet his lips as if he found them cracked and dry.

"Isn't there any way to fix it? This—this would ruin me."

"We're not thinking of you," said the hard voice from the other end. "We are thinking of the industry and our company. We'd throw you to the lions in an instant, if that would do any good. Have you any alibi? Were you at that Maribou Beach bungalow with the gal? Were you seen at the Beach Club? Can you prove these things untrue?"

"I need time—time."

"Time is something that I am afraid you can't have. Here's the set-up. That homicide chief was looking for a good press. Things haven't been setting so well. He went through that Jane's apartment and he found a diary. I have a pipe line to headquarters. I got to the chief and offered him a thousand smackers. But one of the lads from the tabs had got to him, first, and it looks like there'll be a grand jury investigation. It'll all start in *The Call* tomorrow. Wait a minute. The King wants you."

Sweat poured from Barnes. His hand shook as he held the receiver.

"Hello, hello, Barnes," said a very thin voice, utterly without emotion. "This is the King speaking. You are to take an indefinite leave of absence. There is a clipper for Hawaii tonight. There's a ticket at the airport in the name of John Shivers. Pick it up and try to get out without being interviewed. If the Johnston office beefs, you'll go off the payroll at once. Your contract will be terminated under the morals' code and Item 122 in your contract. We'll contact you at Hawaii. Keep away from the press."

There was a click at the other end.

"My God!" The man gasped, "They've found a diary! All about me!"

Bonnie laughed. "They've caught up with you, Townie, just because a poor sap of a female had the old fashioned habit of writing in a diary!"

He groaned. "This—this happening to me?"

"I fear you have a bit of packing to do, Townie. Though it may be

bad taste to mention it, I have a few people coming out. I have my reputation to consider. I wish you'd take yourself away."

It was impossible to tell just how much he heard. He sprang to his feet, knocking over his drink, and started to run toward his car. That was the last Bonnie was to ever see of Townsend Barnes. He planed to Hawaii where, within a week, his services were terminated by the studio.

They don't always catch up with heels in Hollywood. But they caught up with Townsend Barnes. And when they start making an outcast of anyone in the movie capital, they do a thorough and satisfactory job.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Slim Travers arrived before seven o'clock, and a late and cold supper was served on the terrace, under dim indirect lights.

"Talk about a prison grapevine, it has nothing on this town," said Slim. "I heard about Townie Barnes everywhere. One fine thing is that you were in and out of his life. Your name won't be bracketed with his."

"Just what is this *morals clause* everyone talks about? Does it mean—"

"It means whatever you do, don't get found out. The movie industry is sensitive as Caesar's wife. You see, darling, these hypocritical gossip slingers of movieland love to have data to blast with. The public forgets, though they are aware, that if there was no scandal out here they'd lose their jobs. They have to have dirt to dish and a sewer to peek in, once in a while. They are keyhole guys and broads. The only thing that would really shock them would be a hat pin in the eye."

Bonnie smiled. "So now Hollywood will again be on the march to respectability. Perhaps, dear flesh peddler, you will now let me use my brain and beauty and leave my hips in repose?"

Slim grinned and waved a hand gently, as if to imply that time must elapse before further plans would develop.

"In my next task, my proud beauty, you may have to enjoy the intimate companionship of another male. But your virtue will arise unscathed."

"What is this, double-talk?"

"No, not double-talk, but very confidential chatter. You probably never heard of the tycoon. Held Morgen. If you had, it wouldn't mean anything to you. He's a man who has bought in on oil, movies, steel and politics. No one knows just what he owns in California or the extent of his power. But it is power, tremendous power."

"And his weakness, dames?"

Slim nodded.

"It isn't quite as simple as it sounds. Morgen has been married three times. All three ex-wives are now enjoying very fine property settlements. Only one wife, the last, was in the movies, Evelyn Merlane. I knew her when she begged around for bit roles. I did her a few favors. It never cost me anything. But she always remembered and never went so high-hat that she wouldn't talk with an old pal.

"I met her once after her divorce at Hollywood and Vine. She took me into a cafe and bought me a champagne cocktail. I congratulated her on the settlement. She confessed that she deserved it.

"Now," she told me, "I can sleep with a man again. For two years I have been guarded by eunuchs and sleeping with a man who is impotent."

I asked, "Why three beautiful wives? It seems a needless expense, if not a provocation and torment?"

"Vanity," she said. "His vanity gave him unimaginable pleasures. But the poor wife was constantly watched by detectives. Because of his jealousy a normal existence was impossible. After the thrill of wealthy surroundings palled, it was a hell for any woman with normal emotions."

"Where do I fit in?" Bonnie asked. "I'm not going to marry the old bird, so that's out."

"Of course not. But you could be in his company when this movie is nearing completion. Morgen is the big money man with Cosmic. What we want is a five year contract, with no more than three pictures a year with permission to pick the male leads. Morgen's say-so would clinch the deal."

Bonnie swore. "Sex or no sex, it seems that in order to become a star, I still have to give my best performances in private."

"Those are the facts of life, baby, but with me around there's a quick pay off and because of me you don't have the agony prolonged. And on top of that I've had an idea simmering in my mind about how you can get back at that ex-husband of yours—even make a bum of him."

Bonnie rose like a striking trout to that bait. "Tell me, Slim. Tell me fast! I'd do anything to get back at Redwood! Anything! I've known all along that no success could be sweet or complete while he is still sitting pretty on top of my stolen heap. It isn't only the money. It's the humiliation! Tell me, Slim. Is there a way to get back at him?"

"There's a way," he said, "but I'm not ready to talk about it, yet! Let me do the thinking. I know your possibilities better than you do."

The girl shook her head.

"You're a cold blooded hard boiled article," she said.

"I had a warm, loving nature once. What did it get me? My wife liked a ham with a profile better. Now I get my thrills from moulding life and events. If you become a star, Bonnie, you'll have to admit it wouldn't have taken place without me, Slim Travers. So far you've obeyed orders. Continue to obey and I'll make a bum out of Redwood and a tramp of his broad. All you have to do is work like the devil and do what you're told. Maybe I over-estimate you. Maybe this Held Morgen won't give you a tumble."

"As you say, he couldn't give me a real tumble. But bring him on and I'll exert what little fascination I have left. To beat Jim Redwood, there's nothing I wouldn't do!"

"Good, with that attitude, and your physical equipment you can't lose! In this game you have to imagine you're back at the Court of France where the road to glory was the bed-chamber. Of course a gal's gotta have looks and the little talent that a director can't supply. By the way, I got a load of that quickie this afternoon. They'll have a preview tomorrow out at a neighborhood house. I've passed the word around that yours is the body beautiful. Mary Estelle is only the head."

"Is that good publicity?"

"Have 'em talking, that's the racket. In this big picture, as the Island Princess they'll have you wearing as much flesh as the seal of approval will allow. You'll be coming out of the water with what little you're wearing clinging to your form divine, and all that sort of thing. It's a kind of magic. You've got a nice shape, but so have lots of secretaries and shop-girls. Publicity will hammer for your charms till you are the new Esther Williams. A hundred Janes have legs as fine as Betty's, but hers have been framed in a setting of fame. We'll do that sort of job on you."

"When do we start production?"

"Next week. It's been moved up on schedule. You'll be going to bed

at nine o'clock, getting up at dawn, to be out at your dressing room ready to shoot at seven."

Slim ordered coffee, took no brandy with it. His complexion was better these days. Some of the bitter lines had been ironed out of his face, particularly the long, deep ones from nostrils to mouth. Bonnie thought he was rather attractive, in a tough, hard way. But she knew personal thoughts were out. She was only a counter for him to play with in the money game.

The first scenes were made in a studio about twenty miles outside Hollywood. Bonnie found herself toiling for a dumpy little director named Jack Phelps, who had five children and a wife of twenty years standing. Unbelievably, there are men and women like that in movieland. Only they don't interest the gossip columnists. Phelps was colorless but he knew his business.

The work was hard and slow, but interesting. There were many rehearsals and many retakes. Sometimes only one scene was shot in a day. And that was shot over and over again. It was tough and tiresome. Scenes had no connection with script (they might shoot Scene 5 and 17 one right after the other, since these took place in the same setting). It was like acting in a nightmare.

"Chew up the scenery," Slim told her. "Be a female ham, especially when you lose your lover. Make them notice you!"

"And after this?" she asked.

"I'm working on that. The week before it's in the can, you're going to throw a formal party—evening clothes, white tie and tails. We'll hire a big Hollywood caterer and his staff. We'll even try to get some of the high and mighty British colony, the boys and girls who talk cricket and tea. And you'll invite Held Morgen."

"How do I act with him?"

"Very gentle. The little adoring school girl, looking up to him, wanting to lean on him, and willing in a very quiet and submissive way to do anything he desires. A five year contract, with one independent picture a year is yours, if you make good with him. The odd thing is, that you'll like Morgen. He is, you'll discover rather helplessly with a woman. Knowing why, you can better please his whims."

"A procurer in high places," she murmured, a bit bitterly.

"This is life baby, not the movie magazines."

"All right, all right. Bring on your Held Morgen and I'll try to act girlish and appealing."

Bedtime Blonde

"You'll have to dress for it. Not too low, and no plunging necklines down to the belly. Leave something to the imagination."

"Okay, you call the tune, I'll do the dance."

Six weeks later, Bonnie gave her formal party—just in time, too. The owner of the mansion would be back from England in three weeks and she would be forced to move to a smaller Beverley Hills home with only one swimming pool.

About nine-thirty, Slim brought over and introduced a tall, white haired man with kind eyes and a thin mouth wreathed in a little approving smile.

"This is Held Morgen, Bonnie, whom I told you about. I thought he would like to meet you."

"Little unimportant me," she said, wistfully, and put out her hand in a friendly way.

He took her hand between his own and fondled it an instant. Then he ran his right hand up along the skin of her arm to the elbow in a half caressing manner. It felt like the touch of a spider but Bonnie did not flinch. She gazed deep into his eyes.

"My dear girl, you are exquisite. A solace for my tired eyes. Would you like to take a ride with me?"

Bonnie was about to say something about "my guests", but thought better of it. Her guests wouldn't miss her.

"Of course, but —"

"You won't need a wrap, I have one in the car."

They left together and a dozen women pressed red lips in an agony of envy.

There goes the hidden Power of two Hollywood studios, the man whose name was never mentioned in any gossip column as linked with any woman. That is, unless he decided to marry her. No writer dared bandy Held Morgen's doings. One morning the thoughtless journalist might discover that the pay roll had a new absentee.

An hour's ride out, atop one of the hills, was one of Morgen's places. This one was not on any tourist map. The location was only known to a few. Inside the darkened interior Bonnie was turned over to two maids, who seemed to know exactly what to do. They conducted her to a dressing room where she was disrobed, scented, her hair fixed, or rather, let down over her shoulders. Then a thin and transparent silk garment was slipped upon her, a flower at the bosom and a thin girdle of flexible gold about her waist.

She was led into what seemed a dream out of the *Arabian Nights*.

This was a room of marble with a swimming pool, two feet deep, in the center, with silken cushions all about it. This was not the strange part of the setting. The bottom of the pool, the sides, the walls of the chamber and even the ceiling were of inlaid mirrors.

Bonnie sat down on a divan and kicked off her slippers. Then from some hidden amplifier came a queer and disquieting oriental music. The air was filled with drowsy perfume.

A door opened and shut. Held Morgen appeared in the costume of a Turkish ruler, except that his head was bare.

He smiled as he approached.

Bonnie was soon to learn what Slim had meant in explaining this strange man who was the greatest power of the land. He had lust of his own weird kind. Lust in his eyes. Lust in his hands.

Bonnie tried, successfully, to act as if she enjoyed him, even though she felt as if this was madness in which she was participating, as a houri of a Sultan. But if this was his pleasure, why not cater to his whims? . . . She kept thinking, as she smiled and acted the girlish kitten, with maiden modesty of the five year contract and the independent picture. Two hours later she was back at the mansion to find that most of her guests had left.

"How did it go?" asked Slim.

"All right, damn you," exclaimed Bonnie. "I still have the shudders. Yet nothing happened to me. Maybe I'm just an old fashioned girl."

"Good," Slim said. "Very good. Morgen expects to pay for his pleasures."

On her second visit to Morgen's, as with the first, Bonnie did not expect to meet him as she left or to be driven home. But she found him, unexpectedly, waiting near the car, after she left the dressing room and was about to enter at the back.

His manner was somewhat bashful.

"Bonnie, do not take an old man wrongly. I have your future career at heart. I appreciate your little visits and I wish them to continue. All girls have expenses, clothes and what not. In the Los Angeles National Bank there has been an account opened in your name, a transfer from one of the foreign firms with which I have dealings, so that Held Morgen doesn't enter into the account. Just ask for the yellow sheet with the deposit showing and for a check book. Draw against the sum as you wish. No, don't thank me. Nothing would be a return for the gracious gift of your beauty."

He hurried away. It was certain that he had spoken with an effort.

The next day there was a hold-up on production at the studio. Bonnie managed to get to the bank before it closed. She went to the account window and asked for the yellow sheet she had been told was in her name. Also, she would like a check book. Both were given her with dignified mien. She took both over to a little desk for depositors of the bank, and looked at the sum at the top of the sheet. She nearly fainted. It was six figures! She stared almost in disbelief. She thought of what most men would have demanded, for a tenth part of this sum of money.

"Well, whatever Held Morgen is, one thing is sure—he's no piker. This makes Hollywood seem like the old Court of France."

She placed the yellow duplicate sheet and the checkbook in her bag. Suddenly she began to laugh softly.

Her movie career was one thing, but this didn't come under the partner contract with Slim Travers. He wasn't going to get in on any fifty percent of this side-show!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"WHAT is the reason for my success?" Bonnie Laurie, repeated the question, asked her by a movie magazine writer.

"I would say that hard work, dramatic ability and the breaks that come to those who toil along the right road. These, I believe, are proper recipes for success. No, influence doesn't aid one. When a star is born, it is because the very right man or woman has been chosen. Really, the public alone picks the favorites. The box office tells the tale."

The woman writer nodded. The same old cliches. But what did one expect? Tell the truth and shame the devil, as well as shock the readers? No, she would go on spilling the same old story. She continued with the same stilted interview—the last Bonnie Laurie would give. Her picture had been finished and she was to start on a personal appearance tour to aid in a polio fund drive.

Slim Travers went along on the tour as personal rep of Bonnie Laurie and several other players in the group.

It was in early September when the great private plane came down at the airport near Bonnie's home town, Bordain. She didn't expect

to be recognized as the Bonnie Merston who had fled from the city and afterward was divorced by default. She had been a retired figure. Anyway, the gorgeous creature into which she had now developed with fame and renown, would hardly be taken as the quiet and subdued being who had been married and ruined by Jim Redwood.

"I'll do the denying for you," said Slim. "Why, that phoney life story of yours has appeared in a dozen magazines. The life on the South American plantation, your folks dead and your father's being a younger son of a great British family."

"But it does make me nervous, anyway. I've been wondering if Jim has seen my pictures and been wondering?"

Back at his office, Jim Redwood had been doing lots of wondering. He was certain that this Bonnie Laurie could be none other than the wife he had divorced, though how the metamorphosis had come about, he couldn't imagine.

He had a decided impression that it would be a very wise act not to be at Mayor Marshall's lunch to welcome the Hollywood star. He wished he hadn't been named as head of the local drive, the man to escort her to the local movie palace where the drive would be staged. But this could not be avoided. His efforts had got him into it as the result of his personal popularity in the city. He saw no way out of the fix. Maybe, and he hoped against hope, this was a double. Such things had been—even if he didn't believe she wasn't the Bonnie that he had ruined. If it were Bonnie she would be in a position to make things very uncomfortable for him. She couldn't prove anything but it would all be disagreeable, just when Brenda was trying so hard to go social.

A jittery Jim showed up at the hotel. He was a constant drinker, never publicly over-board, but his face looked a bit flabby. His luck with the market hadn't been so good lately. When he advised others they made money, and he took a small percentage as financial man. But when he had plunged for himself, there had been an upset.

The inside of the hotel was decorated with flowers. The official group was waiting, headed by the Mayor. Two cars came from the airport. The first one stopped, and as Bonnie Laurie stepped out to be introduced to her escort, Jim Redwood thought his heart would miss a beat. This unquestionably was *the* Bonnie!

Mayor Marshall made the introduction, "Miss Laurie, this is our young leader in the polio drive, Jim Redwood."

"Hello, Jim," said Bonnie, "why, I feel as if I were meeting, shall

I say, an old friend? Well, anyway, someone I have known in the past and am pleased to meet again."

But her smile was radiant and she beamed. She took his arm as if genuinely glad to see him again. Puzzled, he wondered. Then she whispered, "Wait until we are alone, Jim, lad, before I tell you about myself and how genuinely tickled I am to see you again. You did me a wonderful turn that I will never forget. You sent me on to success."

Jim Redwood shook his head. If he had ever heard double-talk, this was it. Yet the screen star pressed his arm in such a warm manner and her voice seemed dripping with sweetness. No scene, anyway, that was out. But what could she want to see him alone for? Certainly not to go over old times? Those times must appear horrible to her in retrospect. Just *how* had he sent her on to success? With about seven hundred dollars as her share out of a fortune? That of course didn't seem so large, now. The papers said she was making more in one season than all he had deprived her of. Every Bonnie Laurie movie was a smash hit.

"You perplex me, Miss Laurie. If I may, I shall see you in your suite tonight for you won't plane out to Madison till morning. Meantime, to work."

"But I must sit by you at luncheon, Jim. I may need you to prompt me during my little talk."

He nodded, sorely puzzled. And Bonnie was saying, to herself, "Whatever else Slim Travers did, Bonnie, he made an actress out of you—a real actress."

It seemed incredible to her that she had ever loved this handsome shell, this small time confidence operator.

But one feeling did remain from the past—a feeling of hatred and a deep desire to pay back for the tears she had shed, the suffering she had undergone. The delicate protective covering of illusions had been stripped from her. All the meanness and ugliness of the world was revealed and how a helpless young woman may be thrown out after a sheltered life into a wholly indifferent world. There might be recompenses but there were some wounds that never heal. Revenge would provide a soothing salve.

At luncheon for the polio drive, Bonnie had Jim Redwood seated beside her. Perfectly gowned, with all the expensive little jeweled touches and the aura of success, fame and adulation, she was quite poised as she made an earnest speech. She sold quite a number of the charity bonds. Only the banker, Bill Terton, studied her intently.

He reflected that the daughter of the Merstons might have been this screen star's younger sister. You couldn't compare, of course, for though they might have been twins, Bonnie Laurie was an exquisite woman of the world, an enchantress. The other Bonnie was a silly girl who had blundered into oblivion for all he knew.

After the luncheon, Bonnie whispered to Jim Redwood, "Come to my suite at the hotel after eleven. I have something to tell you that may interest you."

Dazzled, he breathed in the perfume of her presence. The compliment of her glance was heady as her fingers lay for an instant on his arm. On her third finger he saw one of those large, square, and possibly vulgar (to those who do not possess one) multi-caret diamond solitaires cunningly set in platinum.

Jim Redwood met his wife, Brenda, at eleven o'clock outside the movie palace.

"Sorry, darling, I can't take you out, as I intended. This movie star, Bonnie Laurie, wants to see me on something important over at her hotel."

"I watched her tonight. Could that be the Bonnie who was Mrs. Redwood number 1?"

"Act your age. Would that Bonnie be interested in me? Can't two girls look alike? Anyway, this gal has everything that the old Bonnie lacked. You couldn't compare them."

"Maybe this is a trick, Jim? Maybe she is the real Bonnie and wants to get back at you in some way?"

"You have a strange imagination, Brenda. Probably from listening to too many soap operas on the radio. If this Bonnie were the one we used, I am the last person she'd want to see."

That seemed plausible to Jim. He wouldn't have lied to Brenda if she weren't so absurdly jealous. He had shared her suspicion. But if Bonnie wanted revenge she was taking a strange way toward it. What did he have to lose? But more important to his nature, what might he have to gain?

He put Brenda into a cab, unsatisfied, telling her that with the polio drive, he must do everything the star asked. And she had insisted on a personal interview. Trust Jim Redwood. He never lost his head.

Bonnie was waiting in her hotel suite when Jim arrived, and as soon as he came in she telephoned the bar for champagne and lunch. She had not changed to any revealing lingerie. The sex appeal was all right but Jim was one man she could never, never sleep with again.

There were some things too repugnant to even contemplate. She had different tactics at her disposal—now. She had on a golden robe, decorated with black dragons, a dramatic background for her blonde beauty. The waiter soon appeared, served the sandwiches and opened one of the bottles. She signed the tab and he pocketed a folded bill. In five minutes man and ex-wife were alone.

"I know, dear, you have been wondering why I sent for you? You probably thought it was to hurl reproaches at you, but nothing has been further from my mind. If anything, I really owe you a debt of gratitude."

He gulped the wine. "I guess I'm a bit dumb. Stuck too long in a small city. But I don't understand."

"Well, take what would have happened had I stayed here as your wife. It so happened that you had a gal in the background. If you hadn't got rid of me, you would have become bored with my girlish inexperience, made me unhappy. As it was, it was touch and go. Bang, it was all over. I was on my own. I have done well, learned my powers, my hidden talents—and the possibilities that raised me to success and fame."

She half smiled but repressed that secret expression, brought by the thought, "Where would I be without the helping and the prompting of Slim Travers? But he *must* be kept in the background."

"You know something, no doubt, about my career? I do three pictures a year for Cosmic. But I have the right to make one independent movie a year, if I desire. The New York bankers, will loan me any funds needed. I don't want to work that way. I can finance fifty-one per cent to keep control. The big boys won't play that way. I need a smart cookie to dig up financing for forty-nine per cent for a picture that must not cost more than four hundred grand. Half of that is needed. I wonder, Jim, if you would like to see what you can do with local promotion? You don't have to invest yourself, unless you wish to do so. As representative of the interests, you should be down for a fat salary and a percentage of the profits."

He thought quickly. "Why don't you raise the money on the Coast?"

"Because I don't want the Coast or New York, either, to know what I am doing. This will be a little close corporation and Cosmic will be tickled to distribute, I'm sure. The story has been bought by Ernest Chappell, who wrote that big hit the Mello people did last season. I got it cheap at forty grand. He admires me and wrote it for me.

"Here is the dope, Jim. I don't trust you, really. But this has nothing

to do with trust. The fifty-one percent end will handle the money. All your people will do is to share in profits. Your job will be to raise the money in this city. It is a cold business proposition. If it doesn't appeal to you, I'll look elsewhere. Whatever you are—and you are a bad lot, Jim—you are a bright sharpshooter. You would have no trouble in selling stock in Bonnie Laurie in her first independent picture, *Passion's Loot*."

He gazed at her with admiration. "No one would know you, Bonnie. You have become a hard case. Now you only see the money angle."

"That's all, big boy. Don't get me wrong. I don't want your arms around me, again. I just figure you are a darned smart guy to make a legitimate score. If you are interested, wire me at the Coast next week. I'll have my lawyer plane on here to fix up the preliminary papers."

She sighed, and then stifled a little yawn.

"I'm sorry, Jim, but you must run along. I need my beauty sleep. I have all this to do over again, tomorrow, at Madison. All in a fine cause, and the publicity is not to be sneered at."

She dismissed the subject of the independent picture as if from her mind. He could realize that, to a star, with a great income from three movies a year, this was only something on the side.

"Get in touch with me when and if you are interested, and when you think you can raise the money among local investors."

The door closed on him. Bonnie telephoned Slim Travers and asked him to come over and share a bottle that hadn't been opened.

She grinned at him impishly when he strolled in.

"I think I've hooked him, Slim."

"Oh, you are a silly dame. But I guess that you can afford the show."

"I think I handled the affair rightly—and without your advice. One couldn't play the sex game with Jim Redwood. He's a professional at that. The only way was to appeal to him as a bright operator. I told him that he didn't need to invest any of his money—my money, of course, Slim—and that he could get a nice slice as an officer of the company and representative of the investors."

"And you imagine?"

"I imagine that, to cover nearly two hundred grand there won't be any other investors! I think that Jim will sell what property and bonds there are and buy in on what looks like a good thing—a sure thing—like a fixed horse race."

"Why I thought you had him figured as a wise pitchman?"

"I did, Slim. But there was an element I hadn't been able to judge. When I fell for him and married him, I dreamed of a life in a fairy tale. Jim Redwood is one big hunk of vanity. It would never occur to him that anyone would have the audacity to try to take *him* over the hurdles."

"That comes from the lack of a literary education for one thing. Didn't a poet say a wise line about hell having no fury like a woman scorned?"

"I wasn't only scorned, I got the works complete. There is only one way to make him suffer. I believe I have thought out that way."

"Okay, Bonnie, it is your money. Spend it any way that you want. There is more where that came from. You've done all that I advised so I guess I can go along with you on this mad ride."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BRENDA was waiting up, when Jim Redwood let himself into the house. The couple occupied two bedrooms now and she called from her's.

"Jim, come in here."

He started to undress, strolled in with his shirt off.

"I'm all keyed up to know. Is that babe a real double or the girl you married? Don't deceive me. I can find out."

"When I give you my news you will know the star is Bonnie Laurie and not my one time Bonnie whom I kicked out on her you-know-what for you, darling."

"Yep, and for all she possessed."

"*That* Bonnie, if alive, hates my guts. This one isn't interested in me as a male animal who might be thrilling in bed. The facts are these. She makes three pictures a year for Cosmic and is allowed to make one independent movie a year. For the first one she will finance fifty-one per cent herself. Rather than go to the big banks which take a crack at first incoming money, she has suggested that I sell stock in the forty-nine per cent. Bonnie Laurie is the newest and most thrilling woman in the glamour line—box office magic. There's a million to be made with about two hundred thousand."

"Okay, big boy, raise the money. Get yourself on a pay roll. Pull a little rake-off when the profits come in. You're not taking any chances."

He nodded. "I thought you would think this a swell idea. Maybe you can take that spring and summer you have been dreaming of in France and Italy."

Jim Redwood was pleased that Brenda had fallen for his story. She didn't suspect that he had decided on all the jackpot forty-nine per cent would represent. Like all women, he thought, she was conservative. Had she surmised he was going to go the whole hog and then leave her for the rest of her life while he sported somewhere abroad, she wouldn't be smiling up at him!

He stood looking down at her, but in an abstract manner. She was not the Brenda he had known. With security had come that little encroaching fat that can make a young woman appear middle-aged. She had the satisfied smirk of the happily married housewife who is never worried about her husband.

"I'm not at all sleepy. Won't you come in for a while, Jim?"

As he turned to go, she spoke a bit wistfully. But the old time fire was completely gone. He didn't even answer, as he growled something under his breath and left the room. He had lulled her fears and that was sufficient for the night. Maybe there was a prospect there with Bonnie Laurie—in the future? His vanity told him that a woman always forgets if she can be made emotional again. He had no desire for the respectable Brenda. She was someone who knew too much. He still had to carry her along but the pleasure had gone out of their lovemaking.

Several days passed. As Bonnie had figured and Slim Travers had assured her was a fact, you can only sell a sucker when something is shown him.

Then came the telegram:

"Because of reasons you can learn from my manager, Travers, production must start soon unless you wish to declare deal off stop Suggest you fly to Hollywood for consultation with Travers stop See me also of course stop if you have changed mind quite agreeable here Stop thought you might be valuable in future hookups.

Bonnie Laurie."

Brenda received the wire at home, where it had been sent after Jim had left for the office. She opened it *sans* scruples.

"Fly to Hollywood, eh? I'd like to see that baby fly alone. Little Brenda will be along, mink and everything, California, here I come!"

She telephoned Jim and read him the wire.

"When do we go, kid? Shall I call and make the plane reservations?"

"This is business."

"Yeah, and likely to become monkey business. Do you think I'd trust you out of my sight? One thing, though, you are going to sell stock, aren't you? Our money will not go into the deal?"

"Do you think that I'm crazy? I want the safe rake-off. Yes, we will fly tonight. Pack a trunk and express it ahead. Not a word, yet, to the newspapers. Keep this under your bonnet."

He hung up and sighed. He had lied but lying came easy. His idea was to make arrangements with his banker and real estate broker, so that, by writing from the Coast and sending the necessary papers, he could have the family fortune he had stolen from Bonnie converted into cash and sent on to him. Her father, and his father before him, had built a conservative income on land and houses. The market was right for quick sales.

Arriving in Los Angeles, Jim and Brenda put up at a big hotel, taking a suite. He taxied out to Slim Travers' office in Hollywood, near the *Variety* headquarters on Yucca street.

Travers greeted him without enthusiasm.

"Why Bonnie wants to drag you in is beyond me, except that she hated the big bankers. I wish you would wander around, today, and find every method known to discourage yourself."

"Discourage myself?"

"Sure, you are an outsider. You wouldn't be allowed on the set. You will go boasting about and a lot of insiders out here will be mad that they weren't allowed in. Anyway, come back in the morning with your decision. If affirmative, the money must be raised within a month. Oh, yes, if you wish to contact Bonnie, here is her address and unlisted phone number. You are a small city bird and out of place here with the vultures. I told Bonnie —"

Jim snatched the sheet of paper, mumbled he would be back in the morning. He had not expected to be so insulted, but no doubt Bonnie's manager was jealous. He was, certainly, an outsider in this game. And today he was out for information. No human exists who is as suspicious as a confidence man; adept at fooling others he wants to be sure he will not be a mark himself.

His first visit was to the *Variety* office. There a smart young man in the movie department, when asked on the chances of success of a Bonnie Laurie independent picture, replied that it was about 99%. Would it be difficult to raise the money? Slim Travers could do it with

three telephone calls. Why the questions? Any news for *Daily Variety*?

Jim replied the other could say that James Redwood, a middle west investment broker, was in town, and might become interested in an independent movie production. He had met Bonnie Laurie on her personal appearance tour, and he might do some business for her. Yes, he was accompanied by his wife, Mrs. Brenda Redwood, who had movie aspirations. They were at the Biltmore Hotel.

After Jim left, the *Variety* man telephoned Travers. Yes, Redwood might do some financing for the first independent Bonnie would make. She thought him a smart cookie, reasons unknown. Is he wealthy? Not as tycoons go, but enough in the chips. Okay, and thanks for the info for a nice item.

That morning Jim ascertained the name of one of the leading Hollywood lawyers, and also the most important individual talent agent. The lawyer, Morse Corpell, said that he would handle his legal affairs—the down payment was a stiff one—and if he could buy in on the Bonnie Laurie picture he would deem it a favor if he would be allowed to take a piece. The agent lost interest when he found Jim was merely digging for an opinion, but he ventured to say that a Bonnie Laurie production, on her own, was like minted gold in the treasury.

The opinion of such men had weight, and on Sunset Strip, in a swagger bar, he talked with two promoters, sharpshooters with their offices under their hats. Both had books and plays, on options, meaning they could buy them if they had the money. They could get players too, on the same *if* basis. The sum of it all was that neither had anything save a line of talk that Jim admired. As he bought drinks, he wondered how people would invest money on such shifting sand.

"I'd put money in a new Bonnie Laurie independent production," he ventured, carelessly.

Both fellows laughed. "You will never get a chance, chum. Insiders get that kind of gravy as a favor. Why, I could get together six men by tomorrow afternoon and raise three hundred grand. But that Slim Travers, imagine him letting guys like us in on the ground floor. I'm talking about taking a *chance*."

Jim Redwood considered himself wise. He now had sought and obtained what must be unbiased opinions. Everybody, if the facts were on the table, would agree that he was a lucky guy to be handed this sure thing profit. Motive? Well, a dame was hard to figure. Maybe, with all the bad treatment she had received, Bonnie still had a warm

spot in her heart for him, a glow from those wonderful nights of loving. He had given her romance and rapture and happiness. He had been her first lover, and that makes an impression on some gals that they never forget. Whoever comes afterwards makes for an anticlimax. It could be that Bonnie was a one man woman.

If so, he thought, Brenda would be a problem. But enough money could buy her out. There was always a price for a dame like that!

At five o'clock he telephoned Bonnie, made an engagement to drive out to dinner. And at five ten he left word at the desk for Brenda that he would be detained by business.

Arriving at Miss Laurie's Spanish chateau, Jim climbed a winding stairway of fence stone, and came out upon a wonderful stretch of lawn, the foreground for a yellow and pink castle with turrets and balconies. At the left gleamed the inevitable swimming pool. There was no one on the terrace until a butler opened a door of twisted iron-work.

"I'm Jim Redwood, Miss Laurie expects me."

"Yes, sir. Will you kindly come into the library."

Jim followed into a vast room, with tables and chairs, all in bright leather covers. There was a broad bar, behind which the butler, who appeared to double in brass, popped, and asked the guest's pleasure.

"A martini. And why do they call this a library?"

"Because everything in Hollywood is called something it isn't, sir, starting with virgins, by your leave."

"Bartley, Bartley, I'm surprised at you," came a voice, with laughter in it. "You know perfectly well there are virgins in Hollywood."

Bonnie Laurie entered, in simple and expensive sport garb. But she threw off her coat, to appear simple and sweet in a white silk shirt-waist, open at the neck, and with nothing whatever underneath. Every time she took a deep breath her bosom shone pinkly.

"Pardon, Miss, but I heard they caught a virgin in the sea, here in California. The poor thing died before they could get her to shore. They were going to put her in an exhibit of strange and new monsters."

"Oh, make me a martini, too, Bartley."

She turned to give her hand, in a boyish manner, to Jim Redwood. He was so surprised at this familiarity with what must be a servant, and the proffered handshake that he forgot to try to hold the palm against his own for an instant.

Bartley made two more cocktails. Then at a wave of the hand he was gone.

"You can only keep servants by making them more familiar than members of the family. You know they hide mothers and fathers and brothers out in the movie colony. Once in a while one pops up whining that he or she is not supported properly."

She seated herself in a wicker chair, swinging one leg over the other, breezy and at ease. Seemingly she was not interested in what was of such great importance to her visitor.

"Bonnie, I'm raising that two hundred grand in several weeks. That'll cover forty-nine per cent."

"Good boy, good for you and those you represent. See my lawyer, and have him see yours, on the contract. We will start shooting at the old Essenou Studio the first of the month. It's like old times seeing you, Jim. I've been a very virtuous girl, but don't tell anyone, for I'll blush with shame. When this independent movie is over I'm going to let loose and you'd better not be around, unless you are up to your old speed and stamina."

He flushed with pleasure. "Gee, Bonnie, I'd love to show you a sample."

"Oh, it can keep in the hot house. Remember, you have a wife to whom you have to do your duty."

Jim frowned. "I wish you wouldn't mention her. A time may come when —"

"Now, now, let's keep this clean."

He left his seat and went over to her, but she put up the palm of her right hand. This he kissed, but as he reached for her body Bonnie slipped out of the chair.

"Never speak of love when there is work to be done. Our relationship, Jim, for the time, at any rate, must stay on a business-like basis. When the shooting starts on the set I'll be in bed every night at nine-thirty, for I mustn't lose my beauty sleep. When this movie of ours is in the can, and has been given a preview, and judged by *Variety* a success—on that night, when and if it comes, I promise to lie in your arms, again, and beg for kisses and passion."

"Is that a promise, Bonnie?"

"It's a promise—an if promise. But it's good as far as I can make it go—for I have been saving my love for someone. And what better someone than the guy who made a star outa me by kicking me out in the cold? Don't frown, Jim. I thank you for it. It has meant my

present success. But in any case I'm what they call branded—branded with your kind of love-making, my pet. And I look forward to the old nights, again. . . .”

He was too close, now, and she could not stop him. He grabbed at her, pulled her around, and pressed his lips upon hers, madly. Passionately, his fingers pressed into her flesh. Bonnie closed her eyes, tried to keep any expression from her face. Then he released her and she panted to recover her breath. Little tears slipped from her eyes. God, how she detested and loathed him!

But, it was worth it—seeing him there, now, in besotted ignorance, knowing that she had fooled him. Very soon, she knew, he would be sucked into a trap that had no exit.

Bradley knocked, coughed, and then came in to announce that dinner was ready.

“Have the table brought onto the terrace,” ordered Bonnie. “There’s a full moon tonight.”

Jim Redwood sighed and inwardly swelled. This was delightful and a fore-taste of the future. He would get rid of Brenda, somehow. Married to Bonnie, again, everything would be in his grasp. He saw her, in the dim light, lovely and alluring, across the table. Her body gleamed through the transparent silk. He remembered a little mole behind her left shoulder.

Down by the swimming pool there was a bower of tropical flowers, and the scent came to them. On the grass stood a table, with a striped sun umbrella and matching canvas chairs.

“Bonnie, will you ask your man to bring me a bottle of brandy, down there?”

She gave the order. Dinner over, he grasped her hand as she arose, and together they walked toward the pool. To him came the scent of the perfume in her hair. He patted the nape of her neck. He wanted to put a kiss there.

Beyond the chairs he now noted a low, padded divan, covered with water-proof leather. After the butler left he took her over to it and as she sank down he pulled her toward him.

“You are more wonderful than you once were, Bonnie.”

“My youth and its yearnings, Jim, have been held in leash a long time.”

She hated him near her, the feel of his body. As he tried to kiss her she involuntarily turned her lips away and his lips only touched her cheek. His arm went around her waist and he drew her, roughly, to

him. He twisted her sideways, and now he bent over her, his breath panting, his eyes gleaming with desire. The fingers of his right hand touched the silk at the back and he ripped it savagely. Bonnie cried, in actual alarm, for he was physically much stronger, and she would rather die than suffer the humiliation of final intimacy.

But his lips were demanding, now, and his groping hands had her as in a vise. She twisted and turned, and she could have killed him.

Suddenly she clenched her fists and beat against his face. That had no effect. So she turned a ring and as she swung, he swore and pulled loose. The ring had cut his lip.

"I won't share you—I won't share you with anyone."

"You little cat, so that's it! You're jealous!"

He took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his lower lip.

The tension was broken. Bonnie jumped from the divan. In the moonlight she looked like one of those ancient Grecian statues come to life; unclothed from the waist up.

"No, Jim, this can't be. Not until things are as they should be between us."

She spoke truly, words coming slowly, because she had lost breath in the struggle. He wouldn't understand how truly she expressed herself.

"I'm a fright. I have marks from your fingers—fingers like steel. You don't know your own strength." And to herself: you don't know mine. "Go, now, and I'll run indoors. Or stay for a while and drink a few brandies, first, and dream, if you can, how events will work out when my plans come true."

Double-talk, she thought bitterly, what double-talk!

He reached for her, but she evaded him, and fled like a nymph in the night. She was an intoxicating vision, more intoxicating than any brandy.

Alone he took a swig from the bottle—the hell with the glass—and then he went toward the stone steps at the end of the lawn. He took a last glance at the Spanish chateau. Lights shone at the mullion windows on the second floor, springing to brilliance from darkness. Then a shade was pulled down.

Well, there would be another night, he reflected. Then he wouldn't be stealing away like this. He would be master of this layout, and of Bonnie. She couldn't stand the thought of Brenda. That proved, he concluded, with pride and triumph, no matter what had happened in the past, his stamp still was clear, and he could be head man again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BONNIE ran into her bedroom, half crying, in a kind of hysteria.

She picked up the outside telephone and rang Slim Travers at The Friars Club. He happened to be in.

"Oh, Slim, that beast . . . that beast . . . I could have killed him!"

Slim laughed. "At the proper time you may count on him knocking himself off."

"Can't you take anything seriously? He had me in his arms. He was swollen with vanity. He acted as if he had the right. . . ."

"Humph, well he once had the know-how."

"He's a filthy swine. I want guards at this place—and also at the studio when production starts."

"Okay, soon as the contract is in the bag. But remember, even though I may help, this is your show."

"I realize that, but I feel so soiled. His presence brought back everything. I cut his lip with my heavy solitaire—"

"And that stopped the fire-works. You are like all women, Bonnie, you chuck the sex load, show as much as the law allows, act provocative, all the tease stuff, and then you are insulted if a guy sees a green light ahead. In this case you are acting, acting, for revenge, and I hope it proves worth while. As a rule it leaves a bitter after taste. My advice—take a bath, and a drink, and go to bed. The contract signed, I'll protect you—which will be a nice role for Slim Travers. Good night, my sweet."

Bonnie hung up, laughing a little. My sweet, indeed. He said the phrase with the expression of one ordering a hamburger.

She threw the torn waist to the floor, undressed, and went into the bath. Afterwards, in the mirror, she saw the marks of Jim's fingers on her shoulders. How she hated man-handling! Throwing on a silk robe she rang for the butler, and ordered a double scotch, with soda, and crushed ice. The butler placed it on a table near her bed and eyed her curiously, for she had the Hollywood habit of not caring if she was robbed or disrobed before servants.

"That all, my lady?"

"Tell me, Bartley, how long have you been in Hollywood?"

"Long before T.P. Oh, you wouldn't know, but in the old silent days, we called 'em T.P. Talking pictures."

"Were you —"

"Yes, Miss, I was an actor, a lead no less, though my name wouldn't mean anything to you. King Baggot, Wally Reid, why you were in pigtails when those lads and others ruled the silent pictures. Came the talkies they didn't think I could talk. I dunno, I think I talked all right."

"Then tell me, is there any humiliation too low for a woman in the movie colony?"

"The worst is to sell yourself and get bilked in the bargain. No, on the skids you eat dirt, though you never like it. I did bits, was an extra, and then they had me playing butlers. I thought, hell, if I play a butler so well I can make more money being a *real* butler. So now I've been watching high life from below stars. I had my country home, my yacht, my blondes. In Hollywood you can't take much with you—into middle age."

"I'll remember that. In other words, the wages of sin aren't always mink. Thanks, Bartley, you do me good. I was sniveling and crying over humiliation that doesn't stack up."

"Not to snubs and utter poverty, Miss. Just learn to protect yourself with a swell bank balance. That may remain when all else goes. In my day we had salaries that would seem nothing now. When Clara Kimball Young was reported to get a grand a week that seemed incredible."

"Thanks, and what are you getting?"

"Enough, my lady, with the laundry, grocery, meat, and other little kick-backs. I don't rob you more than any other employee would."

She laughed. "Thanks, you do me good."

He bowed, grave in expression, backed out. He was the perfect butler, even if his familiarity would have created a shudder in a British drawing-room drama.

The formalities involved in signing the contracts for the Bonnie Laurie independent picture were lacking in all importance. Slim Travers had his lawyer on hand, and the former represented Bonnie. Jim Redwood had his lawyer, and handed over his check for a little less than the two hundred thousand dollars. The check was tossed on the table. Both lawyers went through the contract, found nothing wrong with it. Jim Redwood was well protected, and would get forty-

nine per cent of the profit, after expenses of production, and distribution, were paid for, including any sale or plan for world rights. Travers, as president, for Bonnie Laurie, star, would give detailed statements every six months.

Jim Redwood signed papers, was handed his contract, and the subject of *Passion's Loot* was changed to a discussion of whether it was worthwhile using blocked dollars to produce in England and Italy? Since American producers had barged into Rome, the prices on everything had gone sky high.

So Jim told himself, as he listened, a half a million is small potatoes out here. Well, I'd like a bag of it. I'll get it. They talk of pictures that make a million. Need four million to break even.

Meantime, after the lawyers had left, Slim Travers told him that, even though he was the only other investor, he must stay away from the studio. Also, since Bonnie must be in bed every night at nine, she had no time for entertainment. Anything social was out. The picture would be rushed—two months would do it unless they were held up on locations. Then there would be a sneak preview and they'd see what was in the can. Redwood would have to act like the man on the street. He had no technical training. Here was a card to The Friars Club. Why not join? There were half a dozen millionaires around there who weren't allowed on the lots where pictures they financed were being made.

Jim knew that Travers was telling the truth and yet he felt a little out of it. He had imagined himself watching the movie being made, even giving a few valued suggestions. But if this was the way it was why this was the way it would have to be.

Naturally he had no idea that Bonnie and Travers—along with Bill Sealock a retired director with a small fortune in annuities who had nothing to lose and thought this good fun—had put their heads together and plotted to make the worst picture ever made in Hollywood. That was a large order—for there had been some terrible if unintentional stinkers. But this was to be tops.

With the aid of a ghosting scenario writer, who hated the movies anyway, and loved the work—so long as his future was in peril—a story was concocted along the lines of the old cliff-hanging serials, where the heroine was always in danger of her life—or loss of honor—and at the last moment, in some incredible manner, was sure to be saved.

Bonnie insisted that she wouldn't harm the career of any modern

player, aside from herself, and she saw little danger of that. The movie would get a preview, and a release in one house in Los Angeles, and another in New York, before being declared a stinker. After that, it could be buried quickly. So Sealock was told to engage only the middle-aged has-beens in the colony, and Bonnie was even going to throw in her own butler, Bradley. The money would do them good and they had nothing to lose.

In order to make certain that there would be no possibility of *Passion's Loot* being taken as comedy, it was to be played in perfect seriousness—"straight", in technical lingo. And as Bonnie's roles had all been of high romance, and she was not a comedienne, the burlesque would all be bungling and unfunny. The dialogue would be stilted, and old-timey, like the scenes. This would be the dead cat to end dead cats.

On the lot none of the players understood what was going on, for the reasons that scenes are never shot in sequence, and they did not get a continuous narrative. Sealock, the director, in the know, worked on the scenes for dramatic effect. They were hammy, and overdone. No one saw the rushes save him, and Slim and Bonnie, and they were agreeably surprised: this was worse than one could possibly expect. Compared to it the worst of radio soap operas was a masterpiece.

Once in the can a sneak preview was arranged in a neighborhood theatre, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. No one was informed, by Slim, aside from the trade papers, and two hundred correspondents, who covered Hollywood from all over the globe. He gave a gossip hint to the Los Angeles movie critics, and gossip column mongers. The preview took place on the 24th of November, and Jim Redwood and Brenda were in their seats at seven-thirty, when the picture would be shown as an unbilled second feature.

Things hadn't been going so well with Jim and Brenda. He hadn't held out enough money. The sum had seemed enough for a year, but expenses were high, and since Brenda had learned of the chips he'd have, they had nightly quarrels. She thought there was a joker, somewhere in the pack. So she complained and was fearful of failure—and more fearful of success. That would mean she would be tossed out—since Jim had learned something about her past that she had tried to keep from him.

The theatre was well filled by nine-fifteen, when *Passion's Loot* began. It was reel after reel of old-fashioned twaddle, drama that went out with bustles, all played in deadly seriousness, tiresome as

an old family album. Bonnie Laurie's dead-pan performance was the worst of the lot.

"They must have put this one on for laughs." Jim heard. "It couldn't have been done on purpose."

The house buzzed with anger and disgust, and people began to get up and leave the theatre.

The next morning the picture wasn't given regular reviews, for it hadn't yet, really, been shown in one of the big downtown houses. But the gossipers condemned it as unworthy of Bonnie Laurie, and *Daily Variety* said, among other things:

New Bonnie Laurie Movie
Lays A Big Egg

"On the surface 'Passion's Loot' is double tripe and a seeming endeavor to throw away money . . ."

Jim Redwood reread that notice, and certain words sunk in. *A seeming endeavor to throw away money!* At last, he had a suspicion that nothing save his vanity and the wonderful show that Bonnie had provided, could have kept the truth concealed from the start. Why would a woman he had treated with such brutality let him of all people in on a good thing?

This picture was a complete and all around flop. His money might just as well have been flung into the ocean. What if this had been by intention: not intention to rob him, but to scatter all that he had stolen from Bonnie?

All night, after hours of reproaches from Brenda, he lay awake and then, early next morning, he crept out to get the newspapers and *Daily Variety*. He hid in a little downtown bar where neither his wife, nor anyone else, would be likely to find him. At noon he went to the bank, looked up his account, and shuddered. Down at Skid Row he went into a pawn shop and bought, for fifty dollars, a revolver, and shells. No questions were asked.

Jim Redwood drank all that day, but he was in one of those peculiarly lucid alcoholic states in which a man gets just so drunk and then nothing appears to effect him any more. In his mind was a fixed idea. Bonnie wouldn't get away with this. Not while he had a gun in his pocket.

At nine o'clock he crept up the stone steps, for the guard was no longer on duty. He didn't know it, but Bonnie was waiting for him upon the terrace.

"Hello, Jim. Want me to order a drink for you? No, I see, your eyes are blood-shot, poor boy. Well, I guess you have enough to cry about."

"Just what do you mean?"

"I mean *Passion's Loot*, you damn fool. The whole thing was a put up job, though that couldn't be proved in court. The only one in it, aside from Slim and myself, was the director. And he won't admit this was a frame-up to make the worst stinker ever made in Hollywood. The fortune you did me out of, Jim, has gone down the sink. You are through—unless you can find another first-class young female sucker, and I doubt it. The heel in you is coming through. It shows in those weak and bloated features. I'm glad you came. I wanted to enjoy my triumph and let you know that it was on purpose that you lost your ill gotten gains."

"My God," he mumbled, "how you must have hated me!"

"That is an understatement, darling."

"And you think that you are going to get away with it?"

"I don't know what is going to stop me. The dough is gone, will never return. I even threw in a lot of my own, but that doesn't matter. I can take it off, and pay less taxes."

She laughed jeeringly and that seemed to convulse him in a final spasm of fury. He stepped close to her, looking down, and then he suddenly tried to pull the revolver from the side pocket of his coat. The barrel caught on the flap, and Bonnie saw her peril. She screamed. Then, instead of trying to run, and give him an instant to get the revolver in the clear, she leaped for his arm, caught it. They pivoted around, while her other hand was on his wrist, trying to keep the barrel pointing down.

The gun went off once, and he threw her aside, raised the barrel, pointed. Then, somehow, he stumbled and fell against the table. The weapon blasted again, but it was turned against him. He cried out, slumped, and fell to the stone flooring of the terrace.

Bonnie ran inside and called Bradley. She told him to telephone Slim. The butler nodded, but first he rolled the body over against the wall of the house, and dashed inside to get a drape to throw over it.

"Perhaps, first, we had better call a doctor."

Bradley smiled. "No, I heard it all. He shot himself in the heart. He's as dead as a mackerel."

Slim came in twenty minutes. He thought, as did Bonnie, and Bradley, of course, about only one thing: that was the kind of scandal that can ruin any Hollywood career. The body of Redwood was carried

over to the garage, with the revolver, and placed in the back of a touring car. Slim drove away with it, and in two hours had placed the dead man on a certain beach where a Coast Guard man on patrol came along every hour. By his side he laid the revolver, after wiping off any new finger prints. He didn't touch the contents of Jim Redwood's pockets. He wanted the body to be identified, for he figured there was a very good reason to suspect suicide. He would give the fact to the press that Jim Redwood had invested a small fortune for forty-nine per cent of *Passion's Loot*!

Returning to Bonnie's home, Slim found her surprisingly cool. Jim Redwood had died, by accident, but otherwise he would have killed her. There should be no trouble, nor indeed was there, after the body was found and identified. Slim's tip to certain newspaper reporters gave a convincing explanation. The dead man had lost all in an unfortunate movie investment.

That would have been the end of *Passion's Loot*, but a strange thing happened. In a release in a big downtown Los Angeles movie house, the picture was taken as a great burlesque take-off on the modern movie in general. Crowds gasped and howled and applauded. The same thing happened in New York. Jim Redwood should have waited. That first cynical, professional response was one thing, that of the general public another.

One afternoon Bonnie and Slim waited in his office until Mrs. Brenda Redwood entered, decked out in black.

"I guess you two know why I am here," she said, dryly.

"Oh, yes, we know," murmured Slim. "And it cost me quite a private detective agency bill to find out what your past life was all about. Now that Jim Redwood is gone you think that you will cash in on the profits that will come from *Passion's Loot*."

"As Jim's widow that about tells the story."

"Life isn't so simple, young woman. I have gone into your past, at considerable expense. At the time of the draft, Jim Redwood tried to get out of the army by listing you as his wife. He even invented, as far as I can find, a couple of non-existent children. They took him, anyway, but it paid off for you until he was released from the service.

"This, alone, would get you for perjury, and what not. Maybe it could be established that you were his common law wife, in which case he would have had no legal right to marry Bonnie. But, Brenda, you made a slight mistake when you told the truth for once, and carelessly gave Menton, Indiana, as your birthplace. Yep, for we went



"I'm not in the mood for love right now, Slim," Bonnie murmured. "But I would be lonely without someone who speaks my language. Would you be along?"
(Specially posed by professional model)

working on your past, there, my pet, and found that in 1934 you married a young farmer named Carroll Temptran. You ran away, or he kicked you out, a combo of both. Whether you ever found out or not, Carroll Temptran had enough of married life, after a course with you, and he never divorced you. Since that is the case, it was bigamy when you married Jim Redwood. You could go to jail for that. We are not interested in your being prosecuted. You can even get the few grand left in Redwood's bank roll for all we care."

"And the profits from *Passion's Loot*?"

"I have located Redwood's relatives, those still alive, up in Seattle, and thereabouts. And now, Brenda, you can take yourself and your phony mourning out of my office. If you slip a word of Bonnie's past to any gossip writer, on any magazine or newspaper, I shall trip you up on that bigamy charge and you'll go to the jug for a long time."

The natural color left Brenda's face, leaving streaks of rouge. Her lips had a dry and cracked appearance. There had been a fortune in her grasp. Now it was snatched away, and there was no hope. She knew enough to see a drab road ahead. She would be the kept mistress of some sharpshooter or other, and then she would go down grade and end up hustling in some dump.

She trembled a bit, and then recovered herself, turned and walked out. She tried hard to put defiance in the tap-tap of her spiked heels, but she was deceiving no one.

Bonnie sighed. There went another of Jim's victims! There were some men who couldn't be touched by a woman without a dirty aftermath.

"You have had a bad time of it, Bonnie," Slim sympathized when they were relaxing back in her room. What I need is a good, long vacation. What you need is love and romance, after this sordid mess. It could be, incognito, you might meet some young feller—"

"I dunno, Slim, the rest part appeals. I'm not in the mood, right now, to be ambitious for any kind of wrestling, even under a Southern moon. However, I'd be lonely without someone who speaks my language. You'd be along, wouldn't you, Slim?"

"Yes, darling," he replied, and he knew then that he must play this game slowly and carefully. The decision would be up to her. But the chance was worth taking, for Bonnie and for love!

THE END



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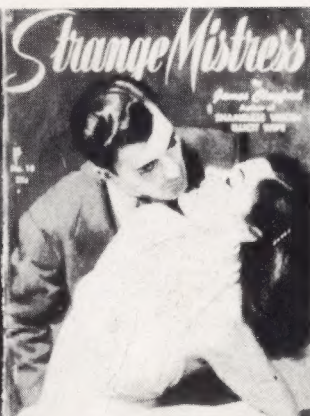
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